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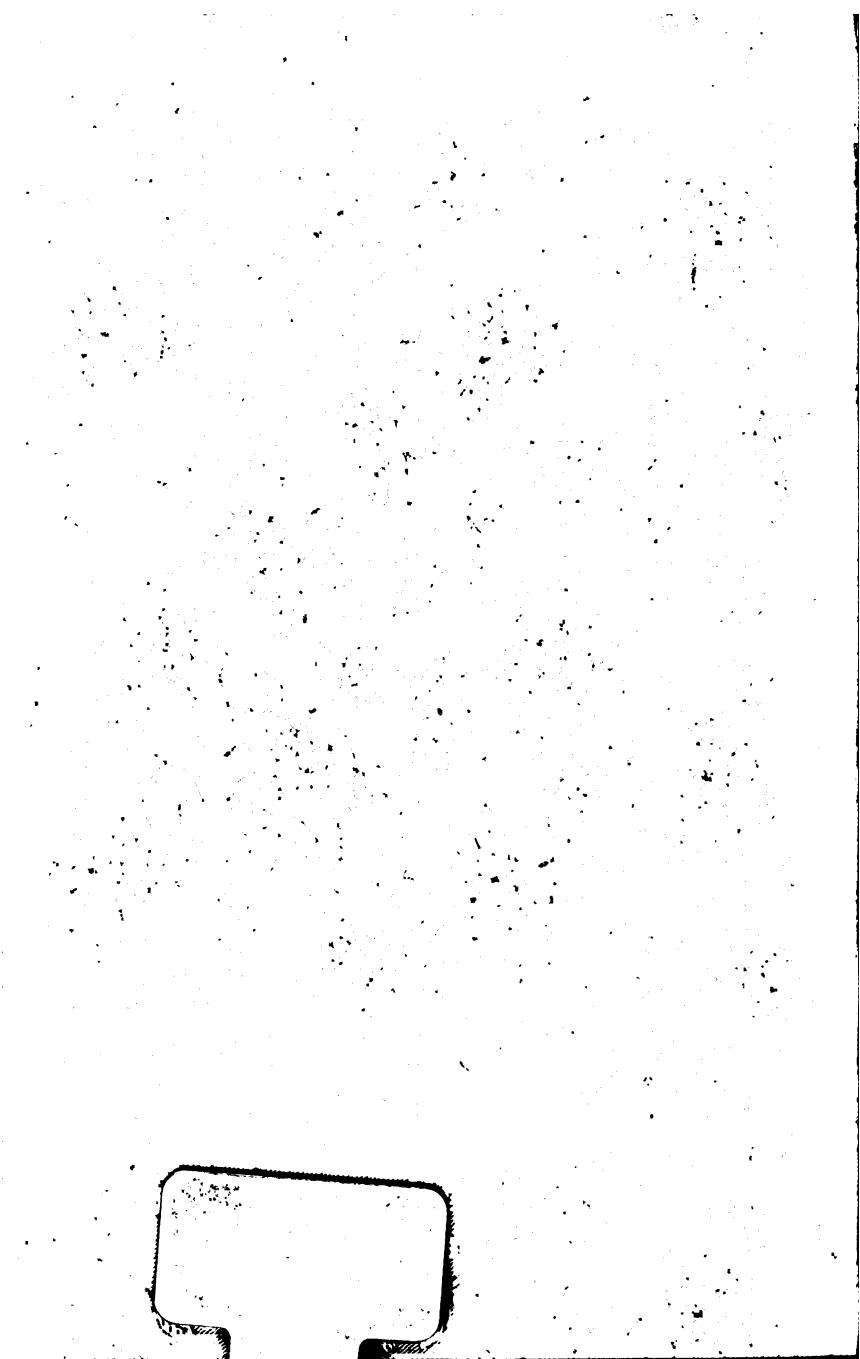
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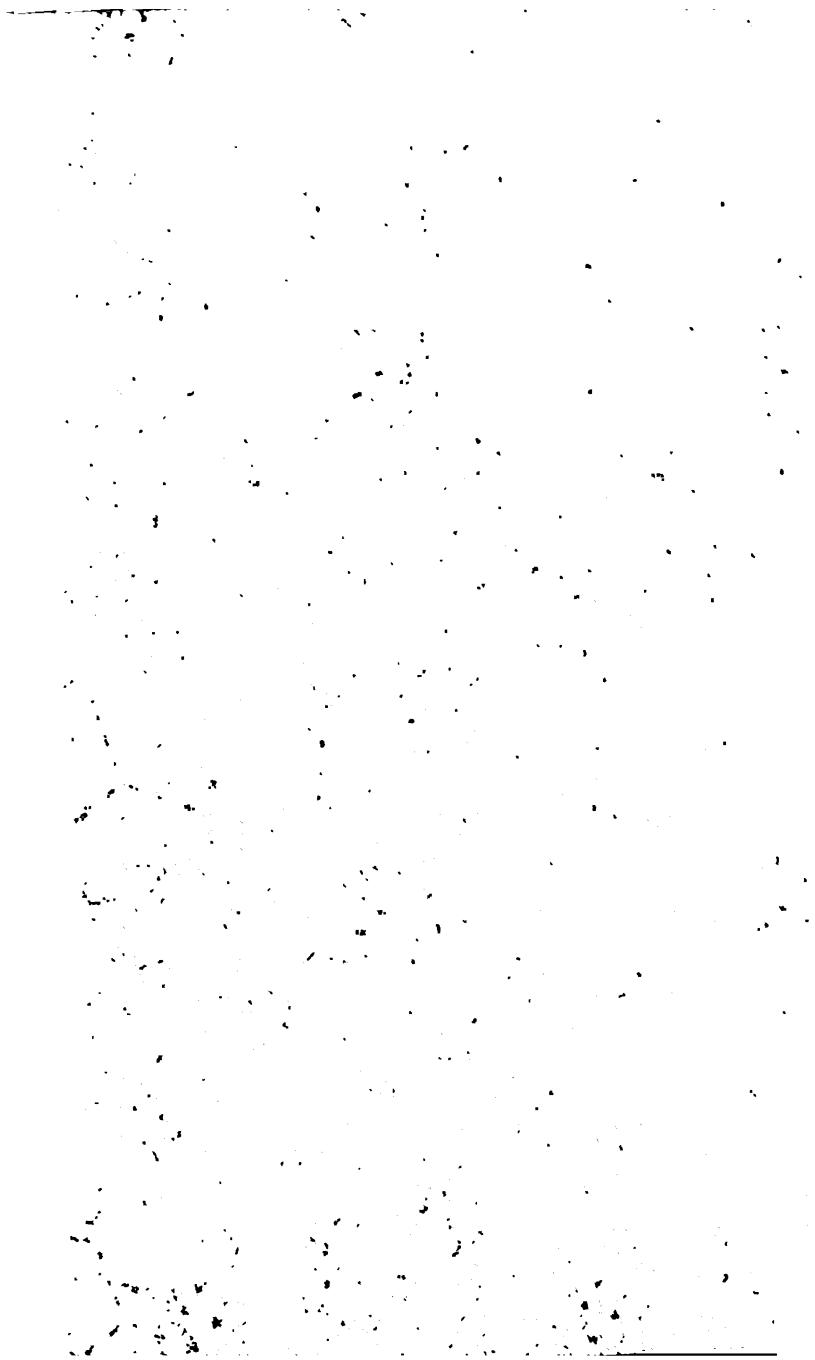
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HELENE

Mme ARTHUR

REINHOLD







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HÉLÈNE.

A Novel.

BY
MRS. ARTHUR KENNARD.

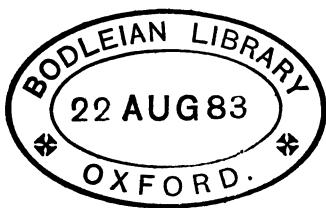
IN TWO VOLUMES.

VOL. II.



LONDON :
RICHARD BENTLEY AND SON,
Publishers in Ordinary to Her Majesty the Queen.
1883.
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25. A. 16. 3.





HÉLÈNE.



CHAPTER I.

'To thine own self be true ;
And it must follow, as the night the day,
Thou canst not then be false to any man.'

HELEN was no Spartan, or self-sacrificing heroine. She possessed no complex emotions, and was incapable of fine-drawn distinctions. Her heart had its method of reasoning, which her reason would have found it difficult to justify. She knew what was right, and did it with passionate impetuosity ; but if you had asked her her

motives, she would most likely have been unable to give them. She felt that by accepting Maurice Perceval's love, she would wreck his life. He was poor, and she was poor. Her religion and nationality were alien ; and above all, she was of illegitimate birth. The other objections might have been overcome, but that was insurmountable. As to what course of action she should pursue, therefore, she did not hesitate for one instant.

Although uneducated according to the standard considered necessary for an English-woman, having at most read some of the poets of her country—the ‘*Livre des Heures*’ and the ‘*History of the Saints*’—she had still a strong, perhaps over-strong, idea of honour, which, without any asceticism, made her incapable of doing a mean or dishonourable action. Many another woman would have special pleaded with herself ; but she being a direct simple nature, only said, ‘It would be wrong to accept his love ;’ thus putting an end to all wavering or hesitation in her mind, though the pain of

renunciation was there, hot and throbbing. She knew that she loved the man—that she loved his handsome presence, his perfect manners, his cultivated mind ; she appreciated his refined surroundings, his noble lineage, his beautiful old place ; she was not a child, casting away a plaything for a freak, but a woman who had suffered all the narrowness, the discomfort of an unprotected, wandering life.

The tranquil, close atmosphere of the house—when at last she summoned courage to enter it—gave her a sensation of suffocation, and made her pulses beat with the suppressed excitement of the emotion that was working within her. When she reached her room, she sank into a chair, breathless; the four walls seemed too small to hold her. Her head throbbed ; there was a humming in her ears. She saw nothing but his face leaning over her ; she heard nothing but the words, ‘I love you—I love you,’ repeated a hundred times. Ah, to feel his arms round her again, to drink long draughts of love at his lips, to answer

his passionate appeal only once—‘for I do love him,’ she sobbed, ‘with all the strength of my being!’

The clock outside awoke her to consciousness as it chimed seven. It was time to dress for dinner, and she got up and walked over to her toilette-table. There was no rose lying there, fresh and fragrant, ready for her ; it was a trifle, but, like many other sweet and gracious things, had latterly constituted the happiness of her life. She had put the soft red and white flowers in her hair, or pinned them in the front of her dress; and felt that a pair of appreciative grey eyes glanced at them every evening. She had voluntarily renounced it all, and was beginning to realize by degrees how much she had depended on it. As she made her way along the passage and down the stairs, she felt weary and sad and shy; and listening in the dusk to Mrs. Perceval’s account of her afternoon, she could not restrain an impatient wonderment why all the joy and beauty of life was sacrificed to petty trivial interests, and

why youth had to lay down the crown of its passion and its love on the irresponsive cold altar of old age.

Shortly before dinner was announced, Sir Maurice walked in, looking as black and moody as some of his evil-faced ancestors on the walls. Walking after Lady Perceval across the great hall to the dining-room, Helen felt rather like the trembling lamb in the fable when the wolf asked him, ‘Why do you dare to come here troubling the water that I drink?’ Any move, however, was a relief; and the fear that Lady Perceval should remark her embarrassment, gave strength to her limbs and steadiness to her throbbing nerves. Sir Maurice seemed to a certain extent to ignore his mother’s presence, and made his victim flush and tremble at the recklessly pointed observations that he made. They sat at the small table at the end of the room; the lamps were not lit, and the half light that fell through the window made the three seats and expanse of white tablecloth look ghastly and unreal. Andrews,

the gardener, had seen fit to decide that all flowers were to be kept for the entertainment next day. The consequence was that poor Helen felt, with sinking of heart, that the entrenchment between her and the enemy was taken away. No leafy screen protected her from Sir Maurice's sarcastic, bitter remarks, which were uttered with the full force of a man's cruelty, who, never having been before refused anything on which he had set his heart, suddenly finds a woman's weak will steadfastly resisting him. There she sat, nervously twisting her wedding-ring, determined to control herself, miserable as he made her feel. The tears were near her eyes several times, but she contrived to smile while listening to Lady Perceval's arrangements for the concert. Once, when the great Newfoundland jumped up and seized a bone off her plate, she laughed hysterically. Maurice looked at her so fiercely, however, that she sank back pale and frightened, feeling relieved at least that the room was getting so dark their companion did not see. Suddenly

a falling star shot across the dusky evening sky, leaving a golden track behind it.

‘Haven’t you a French poet who says something about a star “qui file, file et disparaît,” as so many stars do in life?’ asked Maurice.

‘Yes, it is one of Béranger’s prettiest songs; but I was always told as a little girl that a falling star was a soul escaping from Purgatory and entering Paradise.’

‘These are the charming beliefs of childhood; one ought never to grow old.’

‘Would you give me another slice of mutton, please, Maurice?’ said Lady Perceval’s voice, breaking in at that moment. ‘Don’t you find it cold with that open window, Helen? your voice sounded hoarse just now. I think you had better shut it, Maurice, and ring for the lights.’

Helen did not venture to say anything. She certainly felt cold and uncomfortable, but the shutting of the window looking on the garden seemed to be the shutting out of a land of peace with its starlight dusk. The rays of the lamp, too, were glaring

and bright ; she preferred the half-darkness in which their voices were audible and their faces invisible. The harsh things he said did not sound so terrible when the expression that accompanied them was unseen.

She hailed the end of the repast with a sigh of relief. Sir Maurice sauntered off as usual to the smoking-room, while the ladies adjourned to the second south drawing-room which Lady Perceval always occupied in the summer, fires in the two rooms not being then necessary.

Helen sat down to her work, hoping that as usual the old lady would doze off, leaving her undisturbed to her thoughts. She was deceived, however—her torture was not yet over; the old lady seemed to be seized with a sudden fit of wakefulness, and began talking on all sorts of subjects. She had received a letter, she said, from Laura Bellisle; they, the Bellisles, were to be in London for the season.

‘ I have no doubt she will make a sensation, with her beauty and her money ; but I

do not envy Bellisle, poor man! Laura has her grandmother's temper. Did you ever see her?' the old lady asked, looking up suddenly at her companion.

'Yes, I have met her once or twice in London.'

'Very handsome, isn't she?'

'Very.'

'I hope she won't begin her flirtations with Maurice again; I am not so nervous about it as I used to be—still I have not a particularly good opinion of Laura. She has that taint of illegitimacy on her: it is curious what a curse it always brings—and the Percevals had been so free from anything of the kind until Ralph went away to Italy, and ran off with that Italian countess. Those are the sins of self-indulgence and dissipation that undermine family honour and prosperity. The tradition goes that from the day he brought her here, and the priest denounced them, a cloud has rested on the fortunes of the Percevals.'

Helen shivered and looked up at the portrait of the handsome boy over the

chimney-piece, who seemed to return her glance with a look of sorrowful protestation.

Mercifully, the old lady presently forgot her theories, and laying down the knitting she had made a pretence of doing, was soon nodding, leaving her companion to commune with herself on the bitter-sweet memories of the day.

Next morning all was bustle and preparation. Helen longed to get away, but was afraid of arousing suspicions; she had made arrangements to stop until Monday, and did not like to change them, not only on account of the questions her friends at Stourton would ask, as also because of arousing the suspicions of her uncle and mother. The young woman took courage, therefore, determined to carry a brave face to the end. She helped in the decorations, arranged the flowers, and was present at the last general rehearsal. She congratulated herself that she had nothing to sing or recite, and when the evening came, sank, tired and weary, into a chair

in the front row next to Lady Perceval, to listen to the performance. She felt more of a stranger and alien than ever. The firm footing of affection and friendliness she had achieved with her friends at Stourton seemed suddenly cut away from beneath her feet. Owing to her nationality she was a little more, perhaps, on the defensive; but all the women seemed suddenly to have turned against her. Once she intercepted a look, severe and judicial, that Miss Byers cast in her direction; turning, she talked nervously to Mr. Gibson, and then trembled, for she felt Maurice's eyes fixed on her, and had that magnetic sensation that he was never unconscious of her presence. In spite of all her discomfort, however, a strange exultation made her cheek flush and her eye sparkle, as she said to herself, ' If they only knew that he loved me!'

The concert went off as well as most country concerts do. Margaret Corbett had a strangely pathetic ring in her fresh young voice as she sang 'Auld Robin Gray.' Mr. Ffrench's ears got redder, and stood out

more conspicuously than the most devout lady of his congregation ever remembered, and the choir rewarded his exertions by the perfection of its performance.

When it was over, the Upper and Lower House adjourned for refreshments ; Stourton boasted a House of Lords and a House of Commons. Among the former were the Earl and Countess of Davenport and their three daughters, who had driven all the way from Davenport Castle, eight miles off, and had taken thirty tickets, making use of only six ; in the Lower House, Mr. Gibson, the Member, and his daughter, the Corbetts, the Byers' and Eyres, etc., etc. ; while outside the charmed circle were the general populace—grocers, butchers, bakers—who retailed the necessities of life to both Houses.

The two classes were separated by a wide division of red baize and vacant chairs, and while one adjourned to the dining-room for sponge-cake and coffee, the other adjourned to the back premises for bread and cheese and beer. Helen, being of a practical

turn of mind, in spite of the storm of emotion in her own breast, could not help thinking of the straitened resources of the house, and the amount of solid food that would be consumed.

These feelings, however, did not seem in the least to agitate Lady Perceval, seated at the head of her table, doing the honours as if she were surrounded by a host of powdered footmen, instead of one little white-capped maid-servant.

By midnight it was all over. Helen watched the lamps of the last carriage disappear like stars amongst the trees of the park, and then crept away, glad to be allowed to retire to rest at last.

The following day was Sunday. With a feeling of tranquillity unknown to her for some days, the young woman entered the little chapel, with its statue of the Madonna, its painted windows, and the incense-laden air. Long and fervently did she pray, bending down her head on the seat in front of her, oblivious of the fact that all the other worshippers had gone and

left her alone. As she passed out, the cloth door of the chapel closed behind her with a sigh. Another chapter of her life's history was closed for ever. Again that evening she submitted to the torture of dinner; and again she sat up pretending to read by Lady Perceval's green-shaded lamp, going over and over the same sentence in 'Jane Eyre'; while above, the eyes of the portrait over the chimney-piece seemed fixed on her. At last the moment of release came, and having made arrangements for an early breakfast and the cab to be at the door at nine, as she wished to catch the early express to town, she bade Lady Perceval 'Good-night,' and wandered wearily away down the passage to her room.

As she reached the corner of the quadrangle, and was turning the handle of her door, a curtain that hung across the passage to the left was pushed aside, and Maurice stood beside her. She started as though she saw the Stourton ghost, and cowered like a frightened animal against the door; while from the shadow of the light

that hung above her head her face seemed shrunk and pale, and her eyes dilated with apprehension. She joined her hands, with the gesture of a child begging for mercy.

‘Forgive me,’ he said, coming close to her, ‘forgive me; but I must speak to you once again—for the last time.’

‘Ah!’ she implored. ‘If you knew how I suffer—’

‘I do not wish to make you suffer, but I must know. You are going away to-morrow; I shall not see you again. Is your decision final?’

She hesitated a moment, covering her face with her hands, and trembling before him. A few seconds passed, and then, raising her head with the resolution of all the De Carrels in her face, she steadied her voice and said :

‘It is final.’ A mist came over her eyes as she spoke, and before she looked again he had disappeared; opening the door, she staggered breathless into her bedroom.

A few days before (when she never thought it could be hers) the love of this

man had seemed the greatest gift fortune could bestow on any woman. Now that it was offered her without reserve, she looked upon it almost as a curse; for his sake she must refuse it, and put all idea even of meeting him again far from her. Nothing can be so bitter to a woman as to know that if she accepted the affection of the man to whom her heart is given, she would destroy his position and happiness. What had his mother said of the stain of illegitimacy? What had he himself said about her profession? and what did she herself feel about her poverty? No, there was not to be one moment of hesitation or weakness; the door seemed doubly locked between them. Never should he be dragged down or his position injured by her. Her pride was too great to allow of her submitting to be looked upon as an unwelcome interloper; her heart too generous to admit of her destroying the future of the man she loved. Whatever might take place now, her determination was fixed. Driven out of the dream-world of romance into which she

had unconsciously wandered, she must be content to journey henceforth along the hard road of care and uninteresting reality. So be it, as long as the sacrifice was made for him.

Next morning when Helen came down, she found Lady Perceval alone at breakfast. ‘Maurice,’ the old lady said, ‘had begged to be excused—but, having business to transact on an outlying farm, he had been obliged to go out early. He seemed depressed, poor fellow. Another money worry, I suppose; some farmer who can’t pay his rent. He said he was sure you would not mind, especially as he thought it not unlikely he might see you soon in London.’

‘See me soon in London!’ repeated Helen to herself, as she drove along to the station. ‘Never—never again shall I meet him!’

Ah, why had he so cruelly dispelled her dream? An indignant protest arose in her heart. Why could he not let things be? Why need he come and thus destroy her existence? To think that it was only a few weeks ago she had first seen him, and that now he had vanished out of her life for ever!



CHAPTER II.

‘Les malheurs dont nous nous plaignons ne sont que des bonheurs qui n’ont pas voulu “se laisser faire.” ’

VERYONE who has experienced periods of reaction knows that for the ordinary individual of no particular resolution of character, those moments are the most difficult to face, when with beating heart the traveller in life’s journey descends from the rarefied air and sunlit ridges of the hills, to the valley below, where runs the bare railway line of everyday existence.

Helen, when she arrived at home, found Madame de Carrel ill and fretful, and Mr. Ferrers anxious about his sister’s health,

and going through one of his attacks of pessimism on the subject of political affairs. Although not complaining of any tangible ill, Madame de Carrel was certainly more fragile and less fit for exertion than when Helen went away. She required continual attention, and her irritability was very great. As usual, she asked long and purposeless questions, sometimes continuing without waiting for an answer ; at other times stopping with a sudden abruptness that startled her daughter into uttering something perfectly irrelevant.

‘ How did you get on with Lady Perceval ? What sort of a place is Stourton ? What is Sir Maurice like at home ? Who are their neighbours ? Such were the questions that were continually drummed into Helen’s ear, as she sat at work on her fans or her embroidery through the warm summer days, trying to earn enough by her ingenious brain and lissom fingers to keep their straitened circumstances from becoming too patent a fact to the fastidious perceptions of the aristocratic old lady.

Unfortunately most of Madame de Carrel's thoughts revolved round one central idea—a good *partie* for her daughter. Her fear that Helen should have formed an unfortunate attachment, or have refused some one in consequence of her high-strung ideas of honour, pursued her as the Furies pursued Orestes. Sometimes Helen became nervous, her mother seemed so persistent on the subject; and would look at her, wondering with dread if a shadow were falling on the bright sunny nature.

Weary at last in heart and flagging in spirit, the young woman longed for some outside stimulus, and would fain have begun her lessons with Horace Crofts again. Her voice had regained its strength, and she hoped, if she worked effectively, to be able, by the time London filled at Christmas, to make something professionally. She found her mother, however, so pre-occupied with the idea of her marrying, and with fears that her appearance in public might be detrimental to her chances, that she would not hear of it. On the natural

obstinacy of an Englishwoman Madame de Carrel had grafted the volubility of her husband's people, so that Helen was silenced, and found, if she were to carry out her determination, all the ground won in the spring must be reconquered: courage to make the attempt almost forsook her. Having purposely shut her eyes all her life to her mother's faults, she might be disappointed when she found her selfish and unconscious of the pain she inflicted ; but the weight of her good qualities—her warmth of heart, her loyalty to those she loved—was so much heavier, that it at once bore down the balance in her favour, so far as her daughter was concerned. Nothing, however, is so difficult to bear with as the inelasticity of minds with which one has communion, as they grow old. They cannot expand into our way of life, or our mode of seeing things, and we find ourselves in continual antagonism.

Helen now realized that patience, instead of being a quiescent virtue, was one the exercise of which demands a considerable

amount of energy ; and she had little to spare. The voice of hope, which had before whispered words of confidence in her heart, was silenced for ever. She remembered the happy days when life had been so bright, and even the drudgery of her work a pleasure. Would the voice return ? and if it did, would she hear it, or would it speak to deaf ears ? She felt as though it would be so.

One morning in the midst of these weary, fretting days, a ray of light pierced the gloom. The weather was dismal and wet, in consonance with Helen's feelings. The rain was beating against the windows ; the streets were black as ink ; people were passing quickly under dripping umbrellas. Madame de Carrel had had her breakfast in bed, her almost invariable custom now. Helen, having finished hers, was leaning, sad and disconsolate, against the window, when a railway van, with leather curtains flapping in the wind, drew up at the door. A boy jumped down, took out a small hamper, and descended the area steps.

Angry with herself for the tumultuous beating of her heart, she turned from the window, and pretended to be perfectly indifferent when, a few moments later, the servant brought in the hamper. The perfume of flowers almost overpowered her as she opened the lid and lifted out layer after layer of sweet-scented verbena, honeysuckle, and white and red roses. Congratulating herself that her mother was not present, she cut off the parchment label, addressed in a hand she knew too well, and threw it hastily in the fire.

For the first time Helen realized the intensity of the life she had lived that last week at Stourton. A vision of the old house and of the garden where she and Margaret Corbett had walked with him the evening they went to hear the nightingale rose before her. The re-echo of the nightingale's song seemed to change into his voice, low, sweet, and full; a stretch of scented fields swept across her memory, and a presence that had consumed her life. She had told herself that the sun no longer

shone for her ; fog was as desirable as morning mist; the city sounds and smells as desirable as the song of birds and the ‘draughts of balmy air.’ How was it then that, trembling with emotion, her flowers still half arranged, she took a letter from the bosom of her dress. It consisted only of a few lines written sometime before, and sent with a copy of Morris’s poems which he had promised her one day at Stourton. The words, however, acquired a fresh signification each time she read them.

‘Helen! Helen!’ her mother’s voice called suddenly. Hiding away the letter, the young woman started up and went to her.

‘I suppose I must get up!’ said the invalid querulously ; ‘would you ring for my hot water, and see that everything is ready? What a wretched day! I really think I shall want a fire in the sitting-room.’

‘Very well, dear mother.’

‘Where does that delicious scent come from? it reminds me of the gardens—in

France. Why, my child, you have some verbena in the front of your dress; where did you get it? Have any flowers been sent you?’

‘Yes; a hamper has come from Stourton.’

‘Who from?’ and her mother looked up suspiciously.

‘Lady Perceval, I conclude.’

‘How kind of her! I will get up, and come in to see them presently.’

While Helen walked about the room, laying everything ready, she felt the letter almost throbbing against her heart. A great tenderness came over her—that tenderness which is the inherent quality and best portion of true love; for its great and abiding power is self-sacrifice. It is what makes the love of a true woman greater than man’s strength of passion or ardour of possession. For the rest of the day her mother’s irritability had no significance for her.

A few days after, she said to Mr. Ferrers, when they were in the little sitting-room alone:

'I want to begin work again, uncle.'

'Work ! why, my dear child, you are always at work.'

'No, but my work with Horace Crofts. Nothing I can do with my fingers will bring in enough to make the pot boil.'

'Phew!' he whistled. 'I hoped you had given up that idea.'

'Not at all ; it has only been in abeyance. And now that I come back again, and find my mother ill, and in need of so many luxuries, I feel more money must be earned somehow. Poor dear mother, she has taken it into her head I am to make a wonderful marriage, and get everything I want in that way. I wish you would speak to her, uncle, and show her the absurdity of such an idea.'

'But I don't see the absurdity of it myself ; it is the natural solution of all our difficulties.'

'The idea is perfectly unfeasible. To begin with, there are unlucky circumstances connected with my birth, which my poor mother seems to wish to ignore.' He

nodded, and she went on : ‘ Then I will never leave her so long as she is alive ; and lastly, I have not a farthing in the world, and am not likely, as things look at present, to come across a millionaire.’

She counted off her reasons on her fingers with the air of a Lombard Street banker counting the *pros* and *cons* of a business transaction ; and, when she had done, turned and said :

‘ Now, will you promise not to mention the subject of matrimony any more ? ’

‘ I will promise nothing of the kind.’

‘ Well then, as no prince has as yet driven up in a coach and four to fetch me, shall we agree to ignore the subject, and return to the stern reality of facts ? Mother, as you know, is a perfect baby on the subject of money ; and, uncle, we are in debt ! we owe the landlady here a pretty long bill, to say nothing of other outstanding accounts.’ He moved restlessly in his chair. His hands were folded in his lap, and she laid her little one upon them : ‘ Surely it is less demoralizing,’ she went

on earnestly, ‘to appear in public and earn one’s bread than to live in debt?’

He was silent for a moment, and then :

‘ You seem so determined on the subject that I cannot withstand you. And now I will tell you what, up to now, I have kept to myself. I often meet Horace Crofts at the Eclectic, and he asked me, only the last time I saw him, where you were. I said in the country; and then he volunteered the statement that he thought it a pity you should give up the profession, as he said you most certainly had the dramatic gift. “She would succeed in drawing-room acting and reciting,” were his words, “but her physique is too delicate and her voice too weak for the stage.”’

‘ Yes, but I am stronger now, and feel more fit for the work.’

‘ His opinion is a good one, and believe me, he is correct in what he says. You must be content with what you can do. He told me that he thought now you were worth twenty pounds for the evening’s entertainment of any fine lady.’

‘Twenty pounds! did he say that? Why, it is as much as I could earn in six months by my work or painting! My career is decided, uncle; it would be ridiculous to hesitate. And you know what my mother is; she will soon come round to our views.’

Mr. Ferrers always saw things in the same light as the people he was with for the moment. ‘Few beginners,’ he observed, ‘could have such advantages. Crofts told me the great difficulty is to get an *entrée*; but with his acquaintance and influence he could procure introductions for you at once.’

‘I have some heart to begin again now. Come along, uncle, and try your new song.’ And jumping up with more alacrity than she had shown for some time, she began turning over a heap of manuscript music that lay in a corner of the room.

A day or two later, Helen took a lesson from Horace Crofts; and from that time forth, devoted herself heart and soul to her profession. It was as though a window

through which the winds of heaven blew, and the moonbeams fell, were opened on another life—a large infinite life, full of great possibilities and new emotions, which filled her mind and became a garner-house of riches, into which no grief or sorrow could enter.

The Greek hymn says, ‘Not to all men Apollo shows himself !’ But in striving for something higher and better than he can produce, the artist finds that the intellectual wings get stronger. He may never attain the height he dreams of—may never behold the great sun-god himself. Yet, he will see the sky coloured and flecked with purple and crimson, and a golden light will transfigure the commonest objects surrounding him.



CHAPTER III.

‘Pauvres humains que nous sommes ! ces douleurs dont nous parlons avec tant d’emphase, et dont nous portons le fardeau avec tant d’orgueil, tous les connaissent, tous les ont subies ; c’est comme le mal de dents ; chacun vous dit : “Je vous plains cela fait grand mal ;” et tout est dit.’

HE weeks passed quickly along. Sometimes Helen found the work hard enough, as she had to stand for hours in the day rehearsing her parts with Horace Crofts, and studying alone afterwards. Laurence Ferrers thought it too excessive at first, and shook his head doubtfully; but when he saw her enthusiasm for her art increasing day by day, he bowed his head saying, ‘So be it ; she is wise and strong enough to bear it.’ And after a time he began to

talk to her before Madame de Carrel of ‘we professionals.’

The old lady still chose to ignore Helen’s work, and to intrench herself behind the barrier of complete silence on the subject. It was a trying position for her daughter to occupy, but she found her artistic work a sedative against all annoyance.

Meantime life was gradually whirling her and Maurice asunder, and she would often wonder what all her love-dream had availed. In the inmost recesses of her heart she found the answer.

It had availed something—she had loved with all the strength of her passionate woman’s heart, and had valued the happiness of the man of her choice better than her own happiness or worldly ambition. As for the future, all hope of personal happiness seemed gone, all brightness seemed to have faded out of her life. And yet Helen did not regret what she had done ; she knew she had acted for the best, and was at peace with herself. So now, except for her art, she lived in a neutral

atmosphere, grey and sombre, dull and impenetrable, like the autumn fogs that were again beginning to hang over the city.

In October she got one or two small engagements through Horace Crofts's recommendation; and towards the end of the month made her first appearance before a really critical audience, at an entertainment given by the Steins, rich Jews who lived in Queen's Gate. Horace Crofts had stipulated that she was to receive fifteen pounds, and never told Helen it was on condition of his singing one or two more songs. On the whole, it was a success. She was very frightened, and at first her voice was almost inaudible ; but as she went on, and warmed to the part, she forgot her audience, and compelled their attention by the graceful simplicity of her appearance, and by the pathos of the soft pleading voice. What gave her more pleasure, however, than all the applause, was the sight, among the audience, of her old friend Mr. Byers. The rest of Stourton, she thought defiantly, might forget her, and turn a cold shoulder on her, so

long as he remained loyal. Mr. Stein had been an intimate friend of his when he had been living in London, moving in artistic circles ; and having heard only that day that Helen was to recite at Queen's Gate, he had asked for an invitation.

' I did not wish to make you nervous beforehand,' he said, working his way up to shake hands. ' I knew that this was almost your first appearance in public.'

' Come and let us sit down,' she replied, ' somewhere out of the way ; I want to have a quiet chat.'

' A quiet chat is hardly, I am afraid, within the compass of your powers just now.'

As he whispered these words their host hustled up to introduce an intellectual-looking lady, with tossed hair and clinging gown, an enthusiastic admirer of William Morris, from whose poems Helen had recited. A moment after, she started as she saw Laura Bellisle sail across the room towards her.

' I must thank you for the pleasure you have given me this evening, Countess de

Ferrin. I hardly thought the last time I saw you, that we should next meet under these circumstances.' There was an intangible insolence in her tone.

'I hardly knew how we should meet again myself,' answered Helen, taking her delicately gloved hand with a smile. 'Our conversation was hardly protracted enough, however, to reveal our probable intentions and ambitions.'

Laura, unconscious of the sarcasm conveyed in the tone of the young woman's voice, and entirely occupied with the effect she herself was producing, looked round challenging admiration. Meeting Mr. Byers's eyes, she bowed slightly; and then the shining apparition, with its surroundings of gauze, silk and lace, was whirled away again in the crowd.

'Who the deuce was that?' he asked. 'I have seen her face somewhere before.'

'Mrs. Bellisle; a cousin of Sir Maurice Perceval's.'

'Ah, yes; I know. I connected her with Stourton somehow. Sir Maurice was in love with her at one time, I believe; but

Lady Perceval soon put a stop to that. Handsome woman!' and he looked critically at the vanishing coil of glossy hair. 'I wonder how old Stein got hold of her. Of course, I remember now: she married an American merchant, didn't she? a millionaire; it must be a business acquaintanceship.'

'I hear she is expected to be *the* beauty this year. But why should we occupy ourselves with people for whom we don't care in the least, when I want to hear about everyone at Stourton?' As she spoke she turned towards a chair in the corner, and made a sign for Mr. Byers to take the one beside her.

'We have mercifully been very well.'

'Why mercifully?'

'Didn't you know? Hasn't Amelia written to you? We have had the fever very badly in the town.'

'What fever—where?'

'Typhoid fever. Luckily, as yet it has kept to the low-lying part down by the paper-works; but of course one never can tell, when an epidemic like that begins, where it may end.'

‘ What is being done to stop it?’

‘ Dr. Clark is working as only his great example, the “ Duke,” could work ; organizing fatigue-parties, seeing to supplies, and levying them from every house in the district. I never can get a meal comfortably now. Amelia and Anne spend the half of the day over the stock-pot and jelly-bag, manufacturing messes for these poor people ; and the other half running after the doctor with a basket, or to the chemist’s with a prescription. So imagine what my life is !’

‘ Very good for you, too. Miss Amelia always spoilt you before.’

‘ But come, I have not told you half the local news yet. There has been a pretty kettle of fish about Stourton Court. You have heard, of course——’

‘ No ; not a word.’

‘ Well, you know Clay, the solicitor, who owns all the mortgages on the estate, threatened to foreclose some weeks ago, and turn the Percevals out of the old place. But that generous fellow, Corbett, came forward, took a new mortgage, and check-

mated the scoundrel. Sir Maurice looks anxious and ill; it was a harassing time for him.'

'What did Lady Perceval say?' she asked, clearing her throat as she spoke.

'She did not seem to realize the position. I don't think Sir Maurice told her all. I believe it would kill the old lady to leave the Court.'

There was silence for a few seconds.

'I don't see Ferrers here,' Mr. Byers said next. 'I suppose he came with you.'

'Yes, he is somewhere about; and I must look for him, as it is almost time to go home. How cold it's getting; I think there must be a draught from this window.' And Helen rose with a shiver.

When she and Mr. Ferrers reached home, they found Madame de Carrel had gone to bed. On the table, however, stood two cups, and by the fire they found the coffee-pot simmering. Mr. Ferrers sat down, and while Helen was pouring out the coffee he said :

'Who was that woman who was speaking

to you — that good-looking one with the diamonds?’

‘It was Mrs. Bellisle ; you remember we met her at St. George’s Cathedral.’

‘An Englishwoman?’

‘Her mother was in some way related to Sir Maurice Perceval, but never lived in England, and married an Italian.’

‘Ah, I thought so!’ and a light flamed in his eyes like that of a lamp appearing suddenly in the windows of a darkened house.
‘Her mother was the Marchesa della Guardia.’

‘Yes, that was the name.’

‘The likeness struck me directly.’

‘Did you know her mother, then?’

‘Know her?—she was the woman who wrecked my life! I often wonder why Beatrice and I were so unhappy in our love,’ he murmured meditatively. ‘We both had the power of caring so deeply. But beware of this woman, my child! her mother was a heartless coquette ; and yet her art seemed to raise her above it all. How she could sing!’

‘ You were a priest, uncle, were you not?’ Helen asked.

‘ Yes; I went to Rome, full of Lammenais’s “ Paroles d’un Croyant,” thinking they were the watchwords of Roman Catholicism. I found out my mistake after a short residence there. The young honest life within me revolted at the abuses and immorality. One day, walking on the Pincian, I saw, driving past, the face that was destined finally to sever me from the Church. It is not an edifying story, my child, and interesting only to me. The daughter, if I mistake not, has more of the physical and less artistic power than the mother.’

‘ How severe you are!’

‘ Believe me I am a good physiognomist. I judge people uninfluenced by any personal feeling.’

‘ But I am never likely to come across her, uncle.’

‘ So much the better.’ And the old man finished his cup of coffee and bid her good-night.



CHAPTER IV.

'L'art a besoin ou de la solitude, de la misère, ou de la passion.'

AFTER her first evening at the Steins', Helen—partly owing to Horace Crofts's good nature and partly owing to her own pleasing manner and appearance—got as many engagements as she wished. She was amused to see, in spite of her mother's tacit disapproval, that when a cheque, in payment of her account, arrived one day from Horace Crofts, Madame de Carrel took it without the least compunction; and the young woman was happy in the conviction that the difficulty would gradually be overcome, and her mother induced to look favourably upon

her new career. Helen had that divine instinct of unselfishness. She ever lived for people or ideas; for some one or something outside herself.

Every time she appeared in public, the young artist received letters from aspiring admirers. Some asking to be allowed to come and compliment her in person, others suggesting changes in her reading of various parts, but all were written for the same purpose. She sometimes returned the letter unanswered, at others wrote a curt word of thanks for the advice given.

There was one safeguard, one barrier between her and any passing fancy or sentiment. Love of admiration, love of her art, the wish to excel, were strong; but the one feeling that held her heart was stronger than death, stronger than life; stronger than she herself knew, poor child, until her eyes were opened.

One day, in the middle of November, she received a letter from Miss Amelia, beginning with profuse apologies for not having written before, and stating as an excuse

that she had been so busy nursing the sick and making jellies and soups :

‘ It’s an ill wind that blows no one any good,’ she went on in her practical way. ‘ This fever seems to have furthered my hopes of future happiness ; for Dr. Clark asked me yesterday, when he met me at Widow Wilson’s (who has been very ill, having had congestion of the lungs as well as fever), to become his wife. I thought it was sure to come, for the fact is I have latterly been his right hand. He has personally seen and examined all the jellies and beef-tea I have made, and I must say nothing could have been better. Of course poor Mary feels the approaching separation deeply ; but, after all, I shall not be very far off. Meantime I am glad to say, in the midst of my own happiness, that the fever is gradually disappearing. Considering the severity of the epidemic, I think it wonderful there have been so few fatal cases. I greatly ascribe it to the care and sustaining nourishment the poor people received. We

are to be married (D.V.) at the end of this month. There is no good waiting ; and it is as well for us to get back and settled before the winter really sets in. Please write to me. I am longing for news of you and your dear mother. John tells me your reciting is quite beautiful.

‘ Affectionately yours,

‘ AMELIA BYERS.

‘ P.S.—I have another important piece of news, but I am not at liberty to tell it yet. It concerns the owner of an estate very much encumbered near here, and a girl we all take a great interest in. I will write to you again directly it is formally announced.’

After reading this letter, Helen passed through some of those moments which change the whole future of our life. She neither sobbed nor wept ; but with her, love and happiness, belief and hope, were all gone ! Up to this moment her expectation of pain had been vague, unreal. She had never put it into words. Now it was there—real, acute, intense.

'How selfish it is of Amelia, not to say what she means. She is entirely wrapped up in her own happiness, and thinks of no one else's sufferings. Why does she forget my existence, too, for months, and then only write what pains and hurts me? Why doesn't she tell me the whole truth? Ah, it must—it must be Maurice and Margaret Corbett.'

She threw herself back, and pressed her hands to her head to still the throbbing of her brain.

Argue with herself and convince herself as she would, deep in her heart there had rested the unacknowledged hope, 'His love will last for ever.' Had he not one day told her, 'If I do not find my ideal, or my ideal cannot belong to me, I will never forfeit my liberty, or tie myself to a woman I don't care for.' He could not have forgotten it all. No, it was a mistake. He still loved her, and perhaps some day she might be able to tell him all, and some happiness might yet be her portion in life. She never allowed herself to think what con-

catenation of circumstances could bring such a result to pass, but she indulged in a dream of its possibility.

We never acknowledge the reality of our fate until it is inexorably decided. We always think a miracle will be worked to avert its decrees. The stream will run backwards, the sun will stand still in our case. It is only when we find the stream rushing impetuously onward, and the sun shining with brilliant indifference while our hearts are breaking, that we acknowledge how powerless we are to stop the relentless advance of forces beyond our power and ken.

A famous authoress, who wept many tears, and suffered many sorrows during her long life, has told us in her old age that her moments of acutest physical and mental anguish were those in which she was obliged to suppress her grief and choke back her tears. Cruel as were the moments when she cried out the sorrows of her overladen heart in solitude, they were as nothing in comparison to those when she was obliged to stifle her

emotion, and smile and look cheerful for the sake of those she loved.

When she had later attained the level plain of resignation, Helen looked back to those few first days she spent under the scrutinizing eyes of her mother and uncle, as days of torture. She went about dry-eyed, calm, with that awful feeling of suspense in her heart that was worse than any certainty. She longed to be alone, to face the sorrow that had fallen on her, and to sob and wring her hands. But no, it must not be. She must get through her daily work and her daily duty—attend to her mother, learn her recitations, keep up appearances before Laurence Ferrers ; while every ring that came to the bell went through her like an electric shock, lest, she thought, it should bring the dreaded announcement.

The confirmation came soon enough. A letter from Miss Byers a day or two later announced the engagement of Sir Maurice Perceval and Margaret Corbett. The last

bright filaments of her dream were sundered for ever.

Helen had to recite the same night, and there was that within her which, in the intensity of its strength, carried away all preconceived forms and traditions. It was no longer the knack, the trick of emotion, that had so often called forth the applause she received. Her voice vibrated and trembled, borne on the waving pinions of true passion. There are portals by which talent enters the regions of genius ; either great joy or great suffering will sometimes unlock them ; and then it is that that subtle force which we call inspiration is evoked. We all of us recognise its existence ; we have felt it in a theatre, a concert-room, a church. A sudden hush falls on the audience, for they bow before the intangible presence of an influence they cannot define. Ah, could they but guess how much of the musician's or actor's life-blood it had cost to produce the depth of tone or the pathos of expression which so nearly moved them to tears !

Her uncle conducted her home, as the

Israelites of old might have conducted the Ark of the Covenant of the Lord back to the Temple. She was relieved to find her mother had gone to bed, and wearily dragged her way past her room to her own, giving a kiss to the pale, delicate face on her way.

'I will now live entirely for you, *petite mère*. Thank God, He has left me you, otherwise I would pray for death—for death—for death!' and, the tension being removed, for the first time that day she let grief master her.

When she reached her room she sank into the armchair opposite the fire, burning low in the grate. She sat some time motionless, her hands resting in her lap, half-conscious of the ticking of the clock on the mantelpiece, with which the beating of her heart chimed, as though her life, and the seconds, minutes, and hours were rushing away together.

At last she roused herself, and getting up, crossed the room to where stood an old marqueterie secrétaire, one of the few things

she had bought for herself, and which had become a shrine, almost taking the place of the *prie Dieu* and crucifix opposite. She unlocked it, and opening a drawer, took out a small parcel of letters, only half a dozen in all. Coming back again, she sat down, laid them in her lap, unfolded and read each in turn. When she had done this she deliberately laid the bundle on the fire, where she watched it smouldering away, casting up blue and yellow darts. Here and there, amid the sparks some of the burnt pieces remained intact and still legible. She pushed the coals over them almost fiercely.

‘There is all my happiness gone. I gave him my life, and what has he given me?’

Poor little thing! ‘Her whole life!’ she did not know how slight a thing it was in the balance of time and eternity.

Often during the days that followed, did she thank Fate that she had had the perseverance to cultivate resources outside herself. She was, she felt, infinitely better off

than if she had been without the solace and comfort of her art.

‘They are to be married in the middle of December ;’ she remembered that sentence of Miss Byers’s letter, and felt the painful necessity of in some way letting Maurice and his intended bride, but more especially the latter, know that she had heard of their engagement and wished them all happiness.

To write chill words of congratulation was out of her power ; and yet, would not Margaret think it odd if she made no sign ? Then a thought struck her : she would paint a fan, and send it as a wedding present. At first the idea gave her a stab of pain ; but she accustomed herself to the contemplation of it, until at last she experienced a melancholy pleasure in putting the best of her powers to the painting of the trifle that her rival was to use. Perhaps, too, *he* would look at it—touch it—admire it. There she sat, feverishly working through the short winter days by her little table drawn close to the window, while her

mother dozed unconscious in her armchair opposite.

Sometimes she would lean back with a far-off gaze in her soft dreamy eyes, seeing a handsome face bent with a tender smile over the delicate white blossoms of the marguerites she had painted. And then! ah, then she would see the handsome face close to another woman's ; and those lips—*his* lips—sealing on another woman's the vow and declaration he had made to her! Could it—could it be? Were men so false?

Before finishing her work, she painted a dewdrop on one of the flowers, that rested there like a tear; then she wrapped up the pretty trifle in its soft folds of tissue-paper, laid it in its long narrow box, and wrote her congratulations and kind wishes outside. Her drama of hope and love had been played out.

In the middle of December she received a Stourton paper, evidently sent by Miss Byers—or rather Mrs. Clark, as she was

now. Red crosses and lines marked either side of the columns containing the account of the marriage of Sir Maurice Perceval, Bart., of Stourton Court, and Miss Margaret Corbett, niece of Mr. Corbett of Deringham. Helen remarked with a sad smile that it was *her* Bishop, assisted by Mr. Brotherton, who married them.





CHAPTER V.

T was the week preceding the Derby! Everyone was in town. The season was at its height, and half the world in Grosvenor Square and its immediate neighbourhood, judging by the almost continuous stretch of awnings from house to house, seemed to be entertaining the other half. But everything was dwarfed into insignificance by the great concert at Berkeley House.

A daughter of the house was to make her *début*, and the rooms full of treasures collected by five generations were to be thrown open, for the first time for many years. 'All London,' as the phrase metaphorically goes, was to be there; and 'all London,' in this instance, meant the 'double

cream' of London society—the existence of social skimmed milk, or even single cream, being unrecognised by the Duchess of Berkeley.

For the delectation of her guests, she had provided the best Italian and English artists ; among others Hélène Marguerite, Countess de Ferrin.

Our heroine was still a novelty among the double-creamites, for until now her engagements had been principally in artistic houses. A few fashionable connoisseurs having heard her there, had spoken about her ; and she shortly enjoyed, in more extended circles, that superficial esteem, capricious and variable as the wind, that is called being 'the fashion' in London, and 'the vogue' in Paris. Lord Bacon says, 'There is no beauty without some strangeness in the proportions ;' and that 'strangeness,' that difference from others, Helen possessed in a remarkable degree. It would have been difficult to define in what it consisted, unless it were in her want of interest in everything but that which

concerned her art ; in the simplicity of her dress, which was generally white muslin or white cashmere, and in the utter absence of ornament or ‘get up.’ All these peculiarities were ‘new,’ so society took its latest star into favour from the first moment it appeared on the horizon. ‘So aesthetic, so original, so fetching, you know !’ was the universal verdict. Women began to imitate her clinging cashmere gowns, and to cut their hair in short curls all over their head, as she did. Enthusiastic young ladies sang her songs, and learnt the pieces she recited by heart.

Helen was unconscious as yet of the extent of the ‘fever’ she had created, and smiled incredulously when Horace Crofts sometimes gave her instances of it. She was pleased principally because she knew the greater her success, the greater ease and luxury she could procure for her mother. Being enabled also to demand larger prices, she was not obliged to perform so often, and could devote more of her time to nursing the invalid.

In spite of her increasing popularity, the young artist had never yet appeared before so distinguished an audience as that assembled in Berkeley House on this evening. Although often boasting that she did not know what nervousness meant, her heart beat ominously as the little brougham—which Laurence Ferrers had latterly insisted on her having—turned in at the gates, and rolled round the crescent-shaped drive that led to the house. A wall of brilliant-coloured flowers lined the stately red-carpeted staircase, already crowded with a rustling talking crowd, who, as Helen made her way up, turned and stared at her with that proverbial imperturbability which is looked on abroad as our manner of showing superiority.

She felt a little friendless and deserted amidst the number of strangers, but this feeling soon passed away when Horace Crofts's voice, at the head of the staircase, accosted her with the words:

‘There you are at last; I have been looking out for you. Come along! follow

me. We are not amongst the privileged guests who salute the hostess ; this is our way.'

And he hastened along the flower-lined landing, passing a wide-open door, through which Helen caught a glimpse of brilliant colour, gold-framed pictures, shining lights, and breathed an atmosphere heavy with scent, and vibrating with laughter and gaiety.

'A resplendent creature with a powdered wig asked me just now,' said Horace Crofts, speaking in a whisper behind his opera-hat, and turning back toward her, 'if I were one of the performers, as though he were addressing a Christy Minstrel. What fun it would be if we were to black our faces, dance a jig, and bang away at a banjo! No, though ; it might be a change for the better so far as I am concerned, but it would not do for you. How well you look to-night! You have more colour than usual ;' and he faced her under the chandelier in a dimly-lit room leading to a green-leaved conservatory,

kept exclusively for the use of sentimental couples. ‘Yes, you will do. You are a match for any of them.’

‘I am dreadfully frightened, I don’t know why. I have not experienced the sensation for a long time; it seems quite strange. The house is so big;’ and she looked round bewildered.

‘Never mind! I must insist on my pupil doing me credit this evening;’ walking on towards a door as he spoke, which he opened, allowing Helen to enter the light-suffused atmosphere of the large room she had passed before.

All the other performers had already arrived, and were sitting in a row close to the piano. Some of them Helen had already met. After saluting them, she sat down where she was hidden from the audience by a great palm that spread its glossy leaves between her and them. Some scarlet and gilt armchairs stood yet empty in front; distinguished guests were evidently expected. There was presently a pause, a rustle; everyone rose. The armchairs were occu-

pied, Helen hardly dared raise her eyes to see by whom, and the music began. An Italian lady opened the concert by singing one of her country's bravuras ; there was a duet between her and a fair-haired Polish lady, and then Horace Crofts came. His performance was, as usual, received with that indiscriminate applause with which an English audience expresses its satisfaction. Helen, however, observed with a certain amount of defiant trepidation that the ladies fanned themselves the whole time, and that some talked audibly. These were two things she always took as the test of an audience.

'They shall put down those fans and remain perfectly silent,' she thought to herself, 'or I will never recite in one of these great houses again.'

'Have you quite determined to stick to your programme ?' whispered Horace Crofts, returning to where she sat, after repeatedly bowing his acknowledgments of the public approval.

'Yes, quite.'

‘I think you make a mistake ; it is hardly suitable for the time and place. A translation, too ; but I know it is no use arguing with you. It is Ferrers who has made you in love with the subject. It will be a failure. Do that other piece you had in reserve.’

‘I think not ; its very originality will take.’

‘So be it, then,’ he answered, resignedly.

Her turn came at last, and she recited Dante’s ‘Francesca di Rimini.’

“Note thou when nearer they approach,
Then by that love which carries them along
Entreat, and they will come.”

The words of the pathetic old-world story fell like pearls in the silence of the room. The only sound heard was the rustle of a dress or the sigh of an attentive listener. When she ended softly and sadly with the two lines,

“I through compassion fainting seemed not far
From death, and like a corse fell to the ground,”

a murmur of approbation broke the spell of

astonishment that had held the audience entranced.

She turned, not towards them, but towards Horace Crofts, nodding her head triumphantly. Although unable to appreciate the poetic enthusiasm which had made her keep to her point, he did not the less generously acknowledge her success. She was obliged to advance to the front again, and, obedient to a request from high quarters, give a recitation, in French, of Alfred de Musset's 'Nuit de Décembre,' which was equally well received. After this she was allowed to sit down, and the concert proceeded. When it was over, Helen was immediately surrounded by people desirous of an introduction, and of congratulating her on her success. There was a young Member of Parliament, who wore low shirt-collars and dabbled in literature. He very shortly informed her he was the author of various novels—'Shattered,' 'Twixt Axe and Neck,' etc., etc.; and was astonished when Helen said she had not read them.

'Might I, then, be allowed to send them

to you, with a line or two of the author's in the beginning?"

Then Lord Adair, whom she had met at the Tower once, came up and told her, with a drawl, he 'appwoved' of her choice of recitations, and thought it would raise the public taste were they given more of 'the weal thing.'

A great political personage asked to be presented, and said he wished he could secure the same rapt attention in the House for five minutes, as she had secured for half an hour.

Then Royalty came forward ; all the rest fell back, and for a time Helen was kept fully employed. At last, however, Royalty took its stately way towards the supper-room, and she was left standing alone.

Suddenly a voice sounded behind her ; turning with a start, she said hurriedly :

'Sir Maurice?'

'Countess de Ferrin!' And he took her hand.

'I did not expect to see you here.'

'I hardly expected to see myself here.'

'And Lady Perceval?'

‘ My wife? I left her this moment ; she is talking to Mrs. Bellisle. They were both of them going to the supper-room. Margaret wanted to come and congratulate you, but was taken possession of by some one. Shall we follow their example?’

‘ No, thank you; not now. The rooms are so hot, aren’t they? I wonder if we dare open a window? my head aches. I think—’ And she put her hand to her head, while her lips turned perfectly white.

‘ Yes, I am sure we could;’ and he walked towards one of the French windows and opened it wide. ‘ There, let me get you a chair; you look a little faint!’

‘ Are you not well, Countess?’ asked Horace Crofts, coming forward at that moment; ‘ can I get you a glass of wine?’

‘ No, thank you; I am better now.’

‘ Shall I call your carriage?’

‘ I will call Countess de Ferrin’s carriage when she needs it,’ put in Maurice haughtily. And as Helen sank into the chair he had wheeled up, he whispered, ‘ One of your professional friends, I conclude?’

‘Yes, one of the best friends I have in the world ; he has been of more real use to me than all the fashionable acquaintances I ever had put together,’ she answered, a little nettled.

‘I beg your pardon ; I forgot that you had forsaken everything for your art—even old friendships.’

Hearing the sarcastic tone of his voice, and endeavouring, as women will, to turn over a new chapter, ignoring with superb coolness all those that have preceded this particular one in their life’s story, she answered :

‘I am glad to say my art does fill a considerable portion of my life, which, otherwise, I should not know what to do with ; but it does not prevent my taking a true and deep interest in my friends. Please begin at the beginning, and tell me all about yourselves. I know nothing of you since your marriage, except that of course you had contested Stourton in the Conservative interest—that I saw in the papers.’

Emboldened by her own fluency and

perfect command of herself, the colour came back to her cheeks ; and raising both her hands to the arms of her chair, she threw back her head, and calmly sat waiting for him to speak.

‘ Yes, poor Gibson was obliged to retire through ill-health. I stood for Stourton and got in, which, although it does not say much for the intelligence of the inhabitants, delighted my mother and Margaret. That is why we are in London, and, indeed, that is why we are here to-night—for I am only a pigmy, a country bumpkin amongst these swells ; but the Duke of Berkeley is the great mainstay of the Conservative party, so I am poked in at the end of the list. It is wise of a lion to invite all the little mice to one of his parties. One day his leonine majesty might become involved in a net, and one of the mice might help to gnaw him out.’

‘ How cynical you are ! Why should you not give him credit for being hospitable and wishing to have you here for your own sake ? ’ She looked up, a little pained, as

she spoke ; it seemed to her that there was a touch of asperity in his voice.

He smiled, and turned towards the garden.

‘And a very noble hospitality, too. What a beautiful house it is!’ He was still standing at the top of the room, now almost perfectly empty, the whole of the company having followed the example of Royalty. It looked stately, with its rows of caryatides down either side, gazing impenetrable and unmoved amidst the atmosphere that was throbbing with light and colour from the hundreds of candles that filled the gigantic chandeliers, and shone against the silk-lined walls.

‘Yes, very beautiful! but have you seen the garden? It is like the “Arabian Nights.”’

As she spoke, she leaned forward in the balmy air of the summer night. Through the stone balustrades of the balcony she could see the fountain flashing in the moonlight; whilst round the edge of the basin was a confused band of distinguishable colour. Among the trees here and there

hung Chinese lanterns; immediately under the balcony a brilliantly striped tent opened off the supper-room, from whence sounds of laughter and talking now ascended. In the distance, cutting off this enchanted circle from the outside world, was a row of chestnut-trees ; dimly beyond these again, rose the Westminster clock tower, shining yellow in the silvery moonlight. Above the fairy scene stretched the starry belt of heaven, from which now and then a gentle rustling breeze descended.

‘One can hardly realize that we are in the midst of the busiest portion of London. Our host boasts that nightingales sing in the chestnut-trees opposite, while one of his neighbours owns a rookery. Good swagger, isn’t it?’

They were both silent after Maurice spoke; and then she started, irresistibly impelled to meet his eyes, which she felt fixed upon her.

‘You are changed, I think, since I saw you last,’ he said gently.

‘How changed?’

'I cannot define it exactly; you have not become that detestable product of modern civilization, a strong-minded woman. You are not spoilt by your success, or stuck up; and yet you seem to have become more intangible, to have got farther away from us than ever.'

'My success!—what is my success?' she said, choosing to answer the former portion of his speech. 'A very paltry thing! I am the fashion of the moment, and will be dropped directly a two-headed nightingale or a giantess appears. I only care for it because it gives me the means of procuring luxuries for my mother.'

'Ah, yes! I was so sorry to hear she had been so ill. I did not write to you, because I thought you would not care about it; and I really should not have known what to say. What can one say at such a time?'

He began to flounder a little, and Helen rising, said:

'You must have heard an exaggerated account: she was not so bad as that. But

I think it is time to go home—if she were to wake she would be anxious.'

'Won't you have anything to eat?'

'No, thank you,' seeing a movement at the other end of the room. 'I would rather get away quietly, before anyone comes out from supper.' She rose to go.

'You will allow Margaret to come and call?' he asked.

It was the first time since the beginning of their conversation they had either of them thought of Margaret.

'I shall be charmed. My mother is in such delicate health that we are not generally supposed to be at home in the afternoon; but we shall always be delighted to see Lady Perceval.'

As they were proceeding down the room, they met Margaret and Mrs. Bellisle.

'There you are, Maurice, and the Countess de Ferrin. I could not think what had become of you. Didn't you go to supper?'

'No; we have had the best of it, I think, up here—it's so quiet and cool.'

'I felt a little faint,' Helen added; 'and Sir Maurice kindly opened the window. We have been sitting there ever since.'

Laura shrugged her beautiful shoulders, and turned slightly away, Helen could, however, distinctly hear what she said.

'Why are we to be mixed up with these professionals? I wonder Maurice does it! People will think it so funny.'

The haughty lady looked on Helen as the salmon looked on the trout, and as one beauty generally looks on another—'she was something just too much like herself to be tolerated.' Maurice gave one look at Laura that made even her tremble; and poor Margaret, the inoffensive non-conductor in the midst of warring elements, looked perplexed from one to the other. Her husband, with one of those 'grand seigneur' airs he knew so well how to assume, offered Helen his arm.

She would have given worlds to refuse to take it, but was afraid of further misunderstandings.

‘Would you be good enough, please, Margaret, to follow me? I am going.’ And he walked off, followed by his wife, leaving Laura, bewildered and indignant, standing in the middle of the room. She had the further mortification of seeing the trio stopped at a short distance from her by the kind-hearted, pompous old Duke of Berkeley, who had come back expressly to fetch that young artist who had recited so charmingly in to supper.

Helen declined, with many thanks, pleading fatigue as an excuse.

Down below, the hall was crowded; and there was considerable difficulty in getting the carriages. Helen and Margaret went to fetch their cloaks, and then returned to await their turn. They were soon joined by Sir Maurice, and then all three began talking Stourton talk. Helen asked about Mr. Byers and Miss Mary Byers—Miss Byers as she was now—and the Clarks, and Mr. and Mrs. Brotherton.

‘By-the-bye, Maurice, did you see Maud Hopkins here to-night? You remember

her, don't you?" and Margaret turned to Helen.

"Yes, I remember Maud Purvis, Mrs. Brotherton's niece, who married the son of the Earl of Davenport."

"She has become one of the entertaining ladies of London now," said Maurice. "I don't mean amusing—that was never her style; but she thinks it necessary to have *everyone* in her house. It is quite an imposing sight to see her, armed with a red and blue pencil, going over her visiting-book, putting ruthlessly a red or a blue cross, and "dead," "mad," "married," "ineligible," against certain names. She used rather to affect me, but I am not nearly fine enough for her now. She has asked us to her crushes once or twice, but we don't go."

"Dear me!" said Helen, much edified by the insight she was obtaining into social affairs. "I remember her, a little apple-blossom of a girl, coming to be introduced to the Bishop for confirmation."

Suddenly Lady Perceval's carriage was

announced. A second's doubt came over Margaret's mind. Had Helen been other than she was, she would have at once offered to take her home. But what a complex study the female brain is! There was still just enough of the parvenu in Margaret to make her shirk it ; and as Maurice said nothing, they shook hands and parted. Having put his wife into her carriage, however, he said :

'I will wait and see after Countess de Ferrin : I cannot leave her here alone ;' and to Helen's astonishment she saw him returning, opera-hat in hand, evidently intending to stay.

The sudden and unexpected succession of events that evening had paralyzed her, and she accepted Maurice's return as a natural event which was decidedly pleasant.

'I did not feel happy at the idea of leaving you here alone, so I have sent Margaret home, and come back to stop until you get your carriage.'

'I am so accustomed to look after myself

now that I never feel nervous,' she answered, with a smile.

'I must say I cannot bear the thought of your going in for this sort of life.'

'What? Exercising my profession? I should like to know what all of you in society are doing—acting from morning till night. I at least can say, like all artists, one half of my personality appears before the public, and is applauded, while the other half looks on from the windows of its dwelling-house unrecognised, living in a solitude and peace which even the passers-by cannot disturb.'

'At the same time you artists put all your force and energy into your work, and are therefore unfit to combat the small worries of life. You sit down, fold your hands, and leave them to do their worst.'

'I don't; I fight to the bitter end, and have had enough in my life to keep my weapons bright.' The last words were spoken with a sigh. 'Then I am only a humble aspirant; you are talking of the higher walks of art.'

'I don't know that I am. You see

that pale, thin, dyspeptic man going out, following that robust-looking person in that gorgeous old Venetian brocade ? That is my friend Blackmore. A more artistic soul was never sent into the world, but look at him now ! That brocade he bought in Venice, when he was there with me. When he married her she seized it, had it cut up in a thousand pieces by a fashionable milliner, and now adds insult to injury by dragging him out to see her flaunt it. Alas ! she has cut his talent into a hundred pieces as she has the brocade.'

'Artists ought never to marry,' she said, looking at the couple he pointed out.

'Perhaps not. Do you know the French engraving of a lady leaning forward, holding up a butterfly-net, in the act of putting it over a poor, unconscious, outstretched butterfly, who is already held fast with a pin through his body ? It is called "Les Femmes d'Artistes." Ah ! as one of these misunderstood spirits once sighed to me, "L'état du mariage, c'est un éteignoir." ' Maurice, as he spoke, gave a short laugh.

‘But behold an instance of the intimate connection of events! We have been talking of Venice, and here is Laura Bellisle descending. She is connected with all my memories of Venice.’

‘Is she? You told me she was your cousin, I think?’

‘Yes, she is my cousin. You have met her before?’

‘I have, and I remember your mother talking about her.’

A lovely creature worked her way across to Laura as they spoke, and the two made a telling contrast as they stood together. There was a nasal twang about the speech of the latest arrival that betrayed her nationality. Presently she asked in a very loud voice for ‘Miss Chawner’s carriage.’

‘Thank God I did not marry a girl with a will of her own,’ said Maurice, in a low whisper. ‘Fancy being taken in charge like that!’

‘An American, I suppose? How lovely she is!’

Laura Bellisle and her companion were

soon surrounded by a knot of young men, anxious to call their carriage, or be of use in any way ; and Maurice and Helen's attention was diverted from them to a lady, accompanied by a gentleman, who at that moment stopped beside them.

' So Miss Webster was married to-day,' said the lady in loud tones.

' Yes, and very handsome she looked,' was the response.

' It was lucky she had only a few bridesmaids ; Lord Blackley could not afford to pay for many lockets.'

' No ; it was quite a love-match. I am glad she succeeded at last ; she has tried pretty hard, hasn't she ?' and the two voices vanished in the crowd.

' In spite of the varnish the world puts on them, nature will assert itself ; evidently that was a disappointed mother,' whispered Maurice. ' It is a funny jumble,' he went on, suddenly placing himself opposite Helen, as if to protect her ; for at that moment he saw Laura coming out of the cloak-room, looking superb in a long white cloak, but

with a thunder-cloud resting on her face, of which he well understood the portent.

‘One is continually catching glimpses of unfinished dramas, comedies, and tragedies; but the worst of it is, the actors make their exits and their entrances so quickly, one can only hear half their stories.’

Being an experienced whist-player, he answered: ‘Society seems to me more like a game of cards. We each draw similes from our respective pursuits, you see. Instead of telling their stories, they are all endeavouring to hide them. It is only by observation and calculation that you can guess at your neighbour’s hand. I know exactly, for instance, how many hearts the lovely lady opposite holds, and how many diamonds her husband has given her. I shall endeavour, however, now to trump that portly dowager’s lead, who is trying to get her carriage before us. Buttoning up his coat, and shooting out his closed hat with a click as he spoke, he offered Helen his arm.

As she took it, his companion saw such a gleam shoot from Mrs. Bellisle’s eyes that

she almost shivered, and could not resist saying, with a laugh: 'It seems to me some of us have Mephistopheles sitting behind dictating our play.'

He understood her in a moment.

'Poor Laura! I must go back and look after her when I have seen you safely to your carriage.'

'You understood my lead that time, at all events.'

'You see the advantage of having an intelligent partner. But take care!' he added suddenly, as, catching her foot in a piece of the red baize that was loose, she stumbled, and would have fallen had it not been for his sustaining arm.

As she drove away, the young woman leant forward endeavouring to see if he returned to the house again. And then, angry with herself, she lay back in a corner of the brougham, and with the noise of the roll of the carriages, the stamping of the horses, and the cries of the link-men still in her ears, tried to collect her thoughts.

'Does he love his wife?' she wondered, as with a puzzled expression she unbuttoned and took off her gloves. 'And what is the meaning of the open jealousy of the other woman? Could there be a tie between them of which Margaret knew nothing? No; it was not possible!' And yet there was something in her manner that portended mischief, and frightened Helen vaguely, for Maurice and Margaret's sake. Yes; she wished them to be happy; with all her heart and soul she wished them to be happy. She was lovable, his wife; she was young, and fair, and gentle. Why shouldn't he love her?





CHAPTER VI.

AFTER the evening at Berkeley House, the Percevals and Helen met one another frequently; sometimes of an evening, when they interchanged a word or two; sometimes when Helen went to the Percevals' house, although that was not as often as they invited her. The occupation of her profession, and attendance on her mother, who appeared to be growing weaker from day to day, filled her time almost exclusively. Besides which she felt a certain danger in the atmosphere of the Perceval household, she could hardly have said why. Laura Bellisle was a great deal there, and her influence Helen felt to be distinctly inimical. Margaret was often

whimsical and uncertain when strangers were present, but before Laura her manner was abrupt and reserved, almost to rudeness. Helen tried to reason herself out of this idea, but the fact occurred too often to admit of her ignoring it. Laura had a great influence over Margaret, and that influence was not favourable to her ; it could hardly be on account of social disabilities, for ever since her appearance at Berkeley House it had become the fashion to besiege the young artist with invitations to luncheons, garden-parties, dinners, and concerts. The roll of carriages down Russell Place, and double knocks at No. 12, frequently now disturbed the old-world quiet of the place. She tried for some time in vain to discover in what way she roused Laura's temper, and took herself to task for things she had said and done. The solution of the problem was not far to seek; only Helen was hardly versed enough yet in the ways of the world to find it.

About a fortnight after the Derby, when

men had already forgotten what they had lost or won, and were endeavouring at Ascot to regulate the balance of their accounts, Margaret called one afternoon at Russell Place. Madame de Carrel was particularly complaining that day, and it was impossible for Helen to receive anyone in their little sitting-room. The only thing, therefore, that she saw or heard of her visitor was a pair of nodding, foaming, rosetted horses' heads, a tremendous double knock, and the sharp bark of Judy, Margaret's pug.

Shortly after the carriage had gone, the servant-girl entered the room, carrying a letter and cards. Helen smiled as she opened the former. It was an invitation to join in an expedition down the river on the Thursday following. Only a small party, Margaret said — themselves, the Bellisles, and one or two others. She hoped also that Mr. Ferrers would be persuaded to come. If their reply were favourable, which she and her husband sincerely hoped it might be, they had better meet at

Paddington Station at about eleven o'clock on the morning of the day.

'What is that, Helen?' asked her mother querulously from behind her armchair, which was turned with its back to the door to protect her from the draught.

'Only a letter from Lady Perceval, mother.'

'What about? How reserved you are. You never tell me anything now.'

'Dear *petite mère*, I will tell you anything you want to know,' she said soothingly, coming round beside her mother. 'There is the letter. You will see it is only an invitation from the Percevals to go down the river with them next Thursday.'

'See! How can I see? Are you going?'

'That will quite depend on you, dearest.'

'Of course, you want to go?'

'There is no "of course" about it. If you don't want me to go, I am sure my heart is not set on it.'

'Laurence, too! What shall I do, left all to myself?'

'Dear mother, I will not go. Believe me, I do not care about it one bit,' leaning her fair head softly on her mother's shoulder, and speaking in her ear with a soft whispering voice.

Madame de Carrel was immediately shamed out of her querulousness by Helen's patience.

'A day in the country will do both you and Laurence good. You have no engagement for that evening, have you? You must not overdo it. What should I do without you, my child? You are my sole support and comfort;' and the old lady's voice trembled as she stroked her daughter's cheek.

When Laurence Ferrers came in, Madame de Carrel joined Helen in persuading him to go.

The day in question was as fine as a June day could possibly be, and Helen, who had not had a holiday or been in the country for months, enjoyed the expedition in her

childlike, impulsive way. The party consisted of the Bellisles, of whom Margaret had told her; Maud Hopkins, who, as her husband was at Ascot, came alone; Lord Adair and Miss Chawner, who, though ostensibly under Mrs. Bellisle's protection, seemed quite able to take care of herself. If Lord Adair was as fond of 'weality' as he professed to be, he must have been charmed with this specimen of new-world civilization, who to her extreme beauty added an amount of assurance and plain speaking that, as Sir Maurice informed her, would have fitted her either for a great general or distinguished Low Church parson.

'Now then, Bellisle, you go right away,' she said, turning to her cousin at the door of the railway-carriage. 'We are eight without counting you or the dog,' nodding as she spoke at Judy, who had become fatter and more asthmatic since Helen had first seen her at Deringham. 'I am not going to have my new frock crushed for anyone, I can tell you.'

Obedient to orders, therefore, Bellisle

found a place in a smoking-carriage, amidst the laughter and sarcastic observations of his wife and cousin.

Helen sat next the window in one corner, enjoying the sight of the country in all its splendour of summer foliage, with its vistas of shady lanes, waving lines of hedges, and spaces of green fields, through which the train cleaved its way. At the same time she caught bits of the conversation going on in the carriage, and could not resist once or twice smiling at Maurice, who sat opposite.

Maud Hopkins endeavoured to patronize her at first, while Laura Bellisle was distant and haughty in manner. Weak, foolish Margaret followed their lead as far as she dared. Much to Maurice's amusement, however, his opposite neighbour baffled their attempts to put her down by showing absolute unconsciousness of their attacks. He rose at last in her defence, and began to chaff Maud Hopkins and his wife unmercifully, making running comments on their remarks.

Of Laura he seemed, as Helen remarked, rather afraid, and left her alone.

'I should like the reciting in public and the applause, I think,' drawled Lady Hopkins, while discussing the young woman's profession. 'But it must be so dreadful mixing with artists and that class of people.'

'Yes, that must be a great drawback,' echoed Margaret.

'I can remember the time, not very long ago, when the Lady Maud Hopkins affected intellectual society. Those were the days, however, when we were young and unsophisticated — eh, Lady Maud?' asked Maurice banteringly.

'I don't remember it.'

'I do, though; and I remember also that those were the days when she used to do me the honour of asking me to dinner— a mark of favour she never bestows upon me now.'

'How can you, Sir Maurice!' and in spite of the laugh with which she endeavoured to disclaim the accusation, a

bright flush mounted to Lady Maud's cheeks. ' You know that you disliked the artists yourself, and would not come to meet them, so I gave up asking you in despair.'

' Would not come to meet the artists? Why, my dear Lady Hopkins, I am brother-in-law of an artist, and am bound to say that when I am allowed to go, I thoroughly enjoy his parties, and think him a very good fellow.'

' I did not know your sister was married,' observed Helen, turning to Margaret.

' Yes; she married soon after us. I think you met her husband, Mr. Gordon, at Deringham; he was often stopping down there, but we never had the least suspicion of his intention.'

' If we had, I can tell you we should soon have sent Mr. Gordon, with his ideals of Greek art and his æstheticism, to the rightabout,' mocked Maurice again. ' As it is, we see as little of them as we can possibly help: mercifully they live in a retired part of South Kensington, while

we live in the aristocratic precincts of Mayfair.'

Margaret tossed her head defiantly.

'It really is very difficult to get so far, when one has much to do in the season. And then, of course, we were very much disgusted at the *mésalliance*.'

'I never heard of the marriage either,' said Lady Maud, in a tone which expressed sympathy with the Corbetts in the severe trial they had undergone by the marriage of their niece with a scholar and a gentleman, *but an artist!*

'Well, of course we did not talk much about it. Men are often kinder, we are told, to the brutes than to the women that love them, because the brutes are dumb.'

Maurice turned fiercely on his wife.

'Margaret, how can you talk such snobbish nonsense! Why on earth should your uncle have objected to Mr. Gordon as a family connection? And why should you call it a *mésalliance*?'

'I do call it a *mésalliance* for my sister to marry a man of no sort of birth or posi-

tion, and then to go and live in such a place.'

Margaret was becoming flurried and incoherent.

Sir Maurice smiled at Helen, and shrugging his shoulders in the most insolent way, responded :

' I am to understand, then, that because a man honestly earns his bread by his profession, and lives in the suburbs, he is no gentleman, and his wife is not to be visited? See what you have to expect from Lady Perceval, Countess de Ferrin.'

' You know I did not mean that, Maurice,' said Margaret, floundering still more hopelessly. ' But when people have a large fortune it seems a pity to throw it away on procuring such a position as that.'

' Large fiddlesticks ! ' ejaculated Sir Maurice, under his breath, not very pertinently but very irritably ; and then he continued in the same suppressed tone, ' I wish you would come and see the Gordons some day with me, Countess de Ferrin. He is so improved—has given up all

artificial affected nonsense—paints his wife now instead of those long-chinned, lantern-jawed women he was so fond of. They are one of those rare couples who have married for love, and find it all-sufficing.'

'Why do you live in Russell Place?' asked Laura, who, while apparently talking to Laurence Ferrers, had in reality been listening to the altercation at the other end of the carriage. 'Living in such a street would be enough to give one the blues.'

She turned her Juno-like gaze full on Helen, and threw the words in measured slow tones.

'It really does not matter much to me where I live,' said Helen; 'and I could not change now on account of my mother. She has become attached to the place.'

'Besides,' put in Lady Maud good-naturedly, wishing to smooth over what she felt to be a strained position, and feeling rather guilty of having brought it about, 'it is a most respectable neighbourhood. Why, Sir William Westlake is an

acquaintance of ours ; he lives in Fitzroy Square. My husband often goes down to see him.'

'Ah, Lady Maud, how can you !' laughed Maurice; 'you know yourself I saw you scratch out his name with that fatal red pencil of yours.'

After this the controversy dropped; all the party, except Miss Chawner and her companion, relapsed into silence.

When they reached the lawn at Skindles the ladies sat down under the ilex-tree, while Maurice and Lord Adair got on their flannels. When they came out again, the occupants of the different boats were told off; Maurice taking Lady Hopkins and Helen, Lord Adair and Miss Chawner in a light skiff coming next, while Margaret and Laura were steered by Laurence Ferrers and Mr. Bellisle. All paddled down the stream, until they reached the cool green overhanging shadows of Cliveden Woods. The baskets were soon undone, the champagne opened; voices became louder, and conversation

more continuous. Miss Chawner sang Christy Minstrel melodies, in the chorus of which all joined. Lord Adair repeated nonsense-rhymes, invented on the spur of the moment; and Margaret and Lady Maud, as they ate their sandwiches and pigeon-pie, laughingly recalled their picnics at Stourton.

‘ You remember,’ said Margaret, ‘ when we went to the old castle at Hetheringham; it was the day after your engagement. You were very silly, both of you. I think you wandered away, and were lost among the ruins. We hardly could get home by daylight.’

‘ Yes, I remember; and now my husband is at Ascot, feeling much more interest in the race for the Cup than in ruins or his wife. Such is the way of the world.’

While the two were thus talking, a memory from the past struck both Maurice and Helen. He turned to her as she sat, with the background of distant woods and shining sky imprisoning the soft glance of her reluctant eyes, when she at once turned

them to the cool dim water. Helen felt as though her heart were beating and racing like the current by the side of the boat ; while even with Maurice, for a second or two, the landscape danced before his eyes.

‘I beg your pardon ; what did you say, Mr. Ferrers ?’ Laura’s voice broke in full and clear, waking them like a harsh murmur from their day-dream.

After spending a few more golden hours on the river, the party rowed up-stream again to the accompaniment of Lord Adair’s last nonsense-rhyme, set to a tune from one of Offenbach’s operettas :

‘There was a young man in a boat,
Who said, “I’m afloat, I’m afloat !”
When they said, “No, you ain’t !”
He was ready to faint,
That unhappy young man in a boat.’

It was arranged they should go to Skindles for dinner. The repast over, they sat on the lawn in the soft evening light, with crimson background of sunset. The dew was heavy ; but with outstretched ulsters the gentlemen were able to recline

on the grass and enjoy a cigar, forming a half-circle at the ladies' feet.

A few yards off, Judy, having had her dinner and enjoyed a refreshing sleep, was describing circles in pursuit of her own tail; sometimes rolling over in the vain endeavour to catch it, and barking joyously when she came to the conclusion it was a hopeless task. As usual, the principal share of the conversation fell to Miss Chawner and Lord Adair.

'I have been here about six weeks, and have had such a lovely time,' she told him, slightly through her nose, as, her pretty head nodding from side to side, she sat perched on the end of a bench, like a graceful bright-coloured bird. 'They take you right in here.'

'I should hardly have thought you ever met anyone who could do that, Miss Chawner.'

She looked at him a moment.

'Well, you *are* quaint!' she then said, smiling, with her head on one side. 'But,' giving a comprehensive glance round her,

‘this is the sort of thing I like in England. We haven’t a kind of do-nothing place like this *anywhere in America*.’

‘This is what Mr. Arnold calls one of our “centres of polished bawbwism.” Any Sunday you like to come down you can see the young bawbwians all at play ; it is an edifying sight, I can assure you.’

‘Who is Mr. Arnold?’

‘Mr. Arnold is our great prophet of culture.’

‘Are you all barbarians, then?’

‘All of us. You are the Philistines—by *you*, I mean the American nation.’

‘What makes the difference?’

‘Twadition ! We have inherited twaditions of rapine and luxury, of culture and possession ; therefore we are bawbwians. You on the other side of the Atlantic remain hopeless Philistines.’

‘I have seen curious things here,’ Lady Hopkins was meantime whispering to Margaret. ‘You remember Mrs. Smythson and young Lord Clevering ? I never saw such behaviour !’ In her capacity of

woman of the world, Maud thought it necessary to be posted in all the latest scandal. ‘Across the water you could hear all they said distinctly—I suppose they did not know it ;’ then she continued something in a whisper.

‘Is that what barbarians do?’ asked the young American, looking up into Lord Adair’s face with the most charming candour.

‘Yes, the male bawbwian does that ; he is a pwedatowy animal, but our female bawbwians have either inherited some twaditions of virtue, or the knowledge that they must keep up the semblance of them. It is the Philistine women—those fair invaders of our border, who behave like Mrs. Smythson.’ The young man spoke these words irritated by the unembarrassed frankness of his fair companion, and as he did so he turned to look at her, as if testing how much she could bear. The trouble was unnecessary ; there was not the slightest alteration of her lovely complexion—she neither flinched nor cast down her eyes.

With an ineffably patronizing smile he murmured : ‘ You are almost fit to pass your “pweiliminary” as a bawbawian. You stand fire well.’

‘ I hardly look upon it as dangerous fire. Your ammunition is not good ! It is not we who are fast, but you. The great mistake in your society’—the girl here took a didactic tone—‘ are your matrimonial arrangements. You make girls marry people they don’t care for. Our mothers are not match-makers—they know it would be no use. We are independent ; and it would be enough to tell us we ought to marry some one to make us refuse to do it. We in America are free !’

‘ Vewy,’ murmured her companion.

The girl bent down her pretty head as if she were anxiously looking for something. The young man, returning to his natural courtesy, out of which his neighbour’s audacity had stirred him for a moment, jumped up.

‘ Have you lost anything—can I help you?’

'No, thank you,' she said, a pink flush passing over her face, whether from the exertion of bending down or the pleasure of having nonplussed him it would have been difficult to say. 'I was only looking for that last *r* you dropped.' The listeners laughed at this sally, one so richly deserved.

Suddenly Helen, who was sitting on one side the half circle, saw Margaret jump up with a horror-stricken expression on her face, while she pointed towards the river.

'Maurice! Maurice! save her!'

They all turned in the direction indicated, and saw a small black head bobbing about in the water.

Maurice had been walking up and down with Laurence Ferrers for the last few moments, looking the picture of placid ease, his hands in his pockets, a cigar in his mouth.

'Phew!' he whistled, as he grasped the reality of what was expected of him. 'Must I?' with a rueful expression. 'Yes, I

g suppose I must. Poor little brute!' And hastening to the landing-place, he jumped into the skiff Lord Adair and Miss Chawner had used. 'There, Adair, take my coat,' he added, throwing it upon the bank. 'And where have you put the other oar? There is only one here. Never mind. It is no distance.'

He found, however, that the current was running stronger than he had imagined. The boat whirled round like a leaf on the surface of the water as soon as he got a little distance from the shore.

'How could you, Margaret!' said Laura, turning fiercely on her friend, who was standing beside her. 'I would have let the brute die fifty times over rather than ask Maurice to risk his life.'

Helen stood quite silent, frightened at the vehemence of Laura's manner, and at the possible chance of danger, while Miss Chawner implored Lord Adair to go to his assistance.

'Thank you; it's very considerate of you, but I think he is well able to take care

of himself. There is not the slightest chance, I assure you, of his coming to grief.'

His words were almost immediately verified, for getting round the boat Maurice propelled it in the direction he wished to go, and stretching out got hold of poor Judy, who now was perfectly silent. It took him some time to make his way back against the stream. At last, however, he was able to lay the shivering, dripping little creature in the ulster Margaret held ready.

'I am so sorry, Maurice,' she said, looking up at him. 'I hope you are not tired.'

'No, of course not,' he answered, with a laugh. 'Come along, Adair; we had better go and change our flannels; it will soon be time to go home.'

The two walked across the lawn towards the long, low building on the other side of the hedge. A sudden hush fell on the party left behind. Margaret was occupied with Judy, Laura felt oppressed with the sense of having behaved rather foolishly, and Miss Chawner was yawning with fatigue.

As soon as Maurice and Lord Adair returned, they all, with a feeling of relief, started to walk to the station. The sun had set some time, and there was only a faint glow remaining in the sky, low down among the trees. A small crescent moon and one or two stars were shining in the violet sky, while the sole sound that broke the stillness was the distant lapping of the river among the sedges, and the ghostly rustling of the evening breeze through the hedge by which they passed.

‘Do you remember dear old Hector at Stourton?’ said Maurice’s voice beside Helen.

‘Yes.’

‘He is dead, you know—was run over. That is always the way in life. A wretched little cur like Judy has seven lives, while heroes like Hector always come to an untimely end.’

‘Poor Judy! You ought not to be so severe on her, as you have saved her life. Besides, as long as anyone is fond of her, she fills a void, I suppose.’

‘That is your view, is it?’ he said, with a laugh. ‘Nature abhors a vacuum, hence the existence of Judy.’

Laura looked round, and Helen did not answer.





CHAPTER VII.

BY the beginning of the week after Ascot all the fashionable world was in town again, busily at work turning the social treadmill.

One day Helen was crossing the Park, returning from an interview she had had with a lady in Lowndes Square respecting an entertainment to be given for charity. Horace Crofts generally arranged all her business affairs, but he was so busy with professional engagements that she had taken courage and gone herself.

It was about one o'clock. The Row was full of riders, whilst the Drive was lined with people walking about, or sitting and

watching the file of carriages and equestrians as they passed backwards and forwards.

Helen seldom allowed herself a holiday. Thus she enjoyed all the more thoroughly the warm, bright day, with its fleeting lights and shadows, its gently rustling scent-laden breezes, and continual movement and colour. She sat down at the end of the Row, next the river called ‘The Serpentine’—‘which is neither serpentine nor a river’—and gave herself over to the exhilarating enchantment of the scene.

It is still the privilege of our social arrangements that a lady quietly dressed and determined not to attract attention, generally passes unobserved and unmolested. She saw many faces she knew. Suddenly one stood forth amongst the others with a distinctness that struck like a sudden revelation upon her senses. A finely-cut profile and drooping moustache passed close to her, bent towards a lady with that air of absorbed attention peculiar to Maurice Perceval when beside a woman.

Helen made a futile movement backwards, but felt directly it was useless. He bowed, walked on a hundred yards or so, and then, separating from his companion, retraced his steps.

‘I am astonished to see you here, Countess de Ferrin,’ he said, as he sat down beside her.

‘Are you?’

‘Yes; I associate you with the working bees rather than the butterflies.’

‘Both butterflies and bees love the flowers; why should not I?’

‘I don’t know how it is; for though amongst the butterflies, you never seem of them.’

‘I cannot say I am glad you think so. I consider the butterflies the most maligned of creatures.’

‘There I quite agree with you. I only used “butterfly” as a generic term.’

‘Nothing is so unfair as classification and “generic terms.” There is a small white species of butterfly that is the most

faithful of the animal creation. You never see him separated from his companion for an instant. The two go dancing about all day long together. On the other hand, I look upon turtle-doves as a fraud. They are the most inconstant of birds.'

Maurice was too practised an observer of female human nature not to see that this volley of conversation arose from a desire to hide a certain amount of nervousness. He entered at once into her vein.

'I quite agree with you that in many households, where to the outside world there seems to be a superabundance of billing and cooing, there is generally the greatest fighting and inconstancy behind the scenes.'

Lady Maud Hopkins and her husband passed cantering up the Row. As Helen spoke, she rose uneasily and said:

'Let us walk a little away. I must, I am sorry to say, wend my way home.'

They turned and sauntered slowly up behind the trees.

'Have you an engagement to-night?' he asked presently.

'No. To-night is *rélâche*. So it is for you in the House, isn't it?'

'Yes, I am glad to say. By-the-bye, I want you to come on Friday. I am going to make a speech.'

'Really?'

'Yes—a speech on a subject I have very much at heart.'

'I should like of all things to go.'

'I have taken up the question of sending troops to Canada, and am going to urge it on the Government. Indeed, I should almost like to volunteer for such an expedition myself.'

'You?'

'Yes; why not? I am longing for something to do.'

'But Margaret?'

'I don't think she would mind. I should only be away a few months. But it is early days to talk of such a thing. I

speak the first word on the subject on Friday. I want you to be there. You had better come down and arrange with Margaret about it ; or perhaps she will call at Russell Place.'

'No, don't let her trouble to do that. I must go to Lowndes Square again tomorrow afternoon, to arrange definitely about the concert. I can come on and have tea with Margaret about five o'clock.'

'Very well ; I will tell her. Don't go out here,' as she stopped and held out her hand at Stanhope Gate to say good-bye. 'Let us walk along the top of the Park by the flowers, and I can put you into a hansom at the Marble Arch.'

'What o'clock is it? It would never do to be late.'

'Only half-past one.'

'We must walk a little faster, then.'

Neither he nor she perceived a victoria that swept quickly past them five minutes after, containing Margaret and Mrs. Bellisle.

'I declare there's Maurice! and who is

that with him? Why, Helen de Ferrin!' And Margaret bent forward. ' You remember, Laura, we asked him to come and lunch at the Academy to-day, and have a quiet look at the pictures. He told us—didn't he?—that he had an important engagement.'

' I think he said he was going to see Mr. Gordon's rejected contributions at his studio. But don't fret, my dear ; that is the way of all husbands.'

' Fretting! Why should I fret? He is safe enough in all conscience with Helen.'

' Umph! Is he?' was the only answer Laura vouchsafed, and no more was said.

Next day, when Helen called at Eaton Place, she found Margaret out; but the servant, knowing the terms of intimacy she was on in the house, assured her that his mistress was sure to return shortly. Would she come in and wait? After a slight hesitation, she did so, and soon found herself in possession of the drawing-room, her only companion being Judy, the pug, who was snoring in her basket — the world for-

getting, and, in the absence of Margaret, by the world forgot.

Helen made herself comfortable in one of the armchairs, and, taking up a morning paper that lay on a little round table near her, began to read the news of the day. She had hardly got past the first two or three bulletins, when the door opened, and Maurice Perceval entered. He also held a paper in his hand.

‘I was not sure if it were you,’ he said, ‘so did not dare to come up. Shall we tell George to say “Not at home” in case anyone else calls?’

‘Why should we?’ she asked, with her simple direct look.

‘Because people might think it odd if they found you and me alone here together. Besides, suppose Mrs. Corbett were to turn up. It would be such a bore.’

Speaking, he rang the bell.

‘You told Margaret I was coming?’

‘Yes; only she and Laura Bellisle had some visits to pay. They said they intended to be home as soon after five as possible.

Meantime, I will do my best to try and amuse you. Judy, too, evidently thinks it incumbent on her to do the honours of the establishment. She is beginning to wake up. What have you been trying to read in the papers?

‘Nothing very edifying; only the news from my unfortunate country, France.’

‘Do you know,’ he said, sitting down near her, ‘I never can look on you as anything but an Englishwoman.’

‘Can’t you? I am afraid I look on myself as very French, especially when I see my countrymen making themselves so ridiculous.’

‘They are certainly as a nation reckless and impetuous; yet as individuals I find them cold and calculating.’

‘Thank you for the compliment; but I know plenty of Frenchwomen—ay, and men too—who can sacrifice themselves recklessly and uncalculatingly for—’

‘For what?—for an abstract idea, perhaps; never for their love. But, come here, Judy,’ he said, holding out his hand

to the dog, who was stretching herself on the hearthrug; ‘what do you think about it?’

As he spoke, the servant brought in the tea, with its dainty china and shining silver; while Helen began shaking her lace handkerchief in the endeavour to wake up Judy and make her beg.

‘I am afraid Judy, like most of her sex, is only to be worked on by material motives. Let me tempt her.’ Saying this, Maurice took up a biscuit, and, leaning down close to the low chair on which Helen was seated, held it over the dog. Laughing and talking, they did not hear the rustle of a dress in the conservatory at the end of the room.

‘How delicious your gardenia smells!’ and Helen, throwing herself back, looked at one he had in his button-hole.

‘Not more sweetly than your handkerchief. White rose, isn’t it?’ pressing the delicate atom of lace and cambric to his face, and bending towards her. ‘Exchange is no robbery. I will give you my flower if you will give me this.’

‘I am afraid I should get the worst of the bargain.’

‘Materialism again!’

‘What do you mean by materialism? In spite, however, of the bad names you call me, I will not ask for an exchange. My bargain shall be for “love.” You can have the handkerchief, and let Judy tear it to pieces if she likes.’

‘You must, at least, allow me to complete the bargain.’

She took the flower he offered as he spoke, and, with an uneasy laugh, rose from the chair. At the moment she did so the door opened, and Laura Bellisle and Margaret entered the room. Quick as thought Maurice put Helen’s handkerchief away, and turned to confront his wife. Margaret was in one of her least pleasant moods.

‘I told the servant to tell you that I was very busy, and did not know when I should be back,’ she said to Helen.

‘He gave me your message, but also added that you had said I was to come in and wait.’

‘Did I?’

This was so pointedly rude, that Helen looked up speechless. Laura, however, saved the situation by dashing in with a brilliant volley of talk — what they had been doing, what they had seen, who they had met, what they had said, etc., etc.

‘Will you have some tea, Countess de Ferrin? I am certain you and Maurice have been too busily occupied discussing politics to take any. Can I, Margaret?’ she asked, standing teapot in hand. ‘I think I am intimate enough in your house.’

‘Certainly.’

‘What did you arrange with Mrs. C—— about your recitation?’ Laura went on, addressing Helen, determined to keep the ball going. ‘I hope your interview was satisfactory.’

‘Yes; very satisfactory, thank you.’

‘What date has she fixed for her party?’

‘The twenty-seventh.’

‘The twenty-seventh! Why, has she forgotten? — it is the night of the Court Concert.’

'I think she mentioned it; but it does not seem to make any difference.'

'I dare say it's hardly her set.'

Having rattled on about trifles for some time in this vein, Helen, seeing Margaret was still disinclined to be agreeable, rose to go.

'We shall meet to-morrow, I suppose,' she said to Margaret as she was shaking hands.

'Yes, perhaps so;' and the two women separated.

Maurice conducted Helen downstairs. When he returned to the drawing-room, Laura walked straight up to him, and by a sudden movement snatched out of his coat Helen's monogram handkerchief, the lace corner of which was protruding.

'How sentimental you have become! I never knew you go in for this style of thing before.' Smoothing out the cambric centre, she looked at the monogram with a smile.

'Would you mind giving me that back at once?' Maurice held out his hand with

an expression that would have frightened a braver woman than Laura.

She looked at him steadily for a moment, and then did as he bid her. Margaret sat on the sofa gazing with bewilderment from one to the other.

One of our transatlantic critics has said of Englishmen, ‘The reputation of taciturnity they have enjoyed for six or seven hundred years; and a kind of pride in bad public speaking is noted in the House of Commons, as if they were willing to show that they did not live by their tongues, or thought they spoke well enough if they had the tone of gentlemen.’

Helen had ample opportunity of verifying this criticism next day, as she sat, ‘like a beautiful but dangerous animal,’ in the cage put aside for the weaker sex when they attend the meetings of the legislators of their country. She waited looking at the space below, that was dimly illumined by the coloured glass windows, through which the light fell in patterns on the walls and galleries, and listened to several solitary

figures who rose, stumbled and stammered for some time, and then sat down amidst the ‘Hear, hears’ of the other portion of the assembly ; some of whom either lounged comfortably in the rows of leather arm-chairs, or moved restlessly in or out. Helen could hardly catch what was said, but assumed it was all very good common-sense ; some of the speeches seemed interminable. At last a member, whom she had previously recognised as Sir Maurice Perceval, rose, and her heart beat as she heard the first words he spoke fall on the silence of the House. His voice trembled and faltered at first, but tossing back his hair with the defiant gesture she knew so well, he took courage, and dashed into his subject. There was an instantaneous hush of expectancy as the young baronet began, and that feeling deepened into interest as he went on.

Every Englishman has in him a residuum of the piratical Norsemen and fierce Saxons, his forefathers. The traits of Thor and Odin remain quiescent in his nature, and

only need a trifle to stir them up. The time of which our story treats was one in which one or two prominent Radicals were looked upon as leading spirits, and their utterances accepted as gospel by the tax-paying manufacturing portion of the English public. Some, however, dissented from their dictum. In some the martial spirit of our race still lingered, and that afternoon in the House of Commons it only needed a spark to fan it into a temporary flame.

Maurice alluded to the insurrection that had broken out in a distant portion of her Majesty's dominion, and pointed out, from his knowledge as a soldier, how utterly unfit England was to cope with any disturbance in her present position. He appealed to the House to ask whether the country whom Wellington declared to be the champion of the weak against the strong all over the world was going to allow itself to be insulted with impunity by a handful of half-breeds in Canada, or whether they were going to send a force out to

assert the authority of the mother-country. ‘Are we for the future,’ he concluded, ‘only to boast that we have spun so many balls of cotton into so many yards of cloth, or that we have shot so many thousand pheasants with so many thousand cartridges? Are the memories of Alma and Inkerman to be buried in our coal-pits, and our children to inherit no traditions to stir them out of the apathy which is fast creeping over the land? Is “masterly inactivity” still to paralyze the conduct of our affairs; and England, which once headed the counsels of the world, to sink into the position of an outsider? Or are we going to bestir ourselves, and insist upon an expeditionary force being sent out to restore law and order on our frontier?’

The ‘Hear, hear’ that responded from the Conservative side of the House when he sat down, not only expressed their concordance with his views, but also their gratification to find yet another young aristocrat who could put two or three words together in a cultured way.

Helen, as she listened to him, understood for the first time the individuality of the man, and felt proud as she recognised in him a unit of the strongest power in England.

After some time had elapsed, and several individuals had risen to reply, Maurice was at last able to slip out of his place and come up, his pulses tingling, his face flushed, excited as a schoolboy to hear Helen's verdict. He was intoxicated with his success, and she fully shared his elation. They laughed and talked, oblivious of the 'Silence is requested' posted up outside, or the droning of the speakers down below. Nothing of momentous interest had been expected, and so they had the 'cage' all to themselves.

'But where is Lady Perceval?' Helen asked presently. 'I expected to have met her here.'

'I did not tell her I was going to speak,' he answered, a sudden cloud passing over his face. 'She would have brought Laura, and neither of them really care about politics.'

She felt ill at ease after this statement, and almost wished she had not come. He guessed what was passing through her mind, and nothing more was said.

The leader of the House rose to speak, and they listened attentively until he had done; then she rose, suggesting it was time to go. He accompanied her downstairs. As they were passing through the great archway they saw Miss Chawner and one or two *pince-nezed*, shrill-voiced, well-dressed ladies, armed with Murrays, come fluttering towards them. The party was under the leadership of Lord Adair, who, in a gentle, drawling manner, was vainly endeavouring to cope with the fluency and quick-wittedness of his companions. Miss Chawner came forward at once to salute Maurice and Helen.

‘Lord Adair,’ she said, ‘is just taking us around to show us another of your centres of *barbarism*. And so, as my friends the Septimius Hollands were over from New York for a run on the Continent, I thought I might as well bring them here

and show them some of your institutions. May I introduce them to Sir Maurice, do you think? They have made the acquaintance of a lord; now I guess they would like to know a baronet, just to talk about it when they get home. A title is to us 'Mer'cans what honey is to bears.'

'I dare say Sir Maurice would be charmed,' Helen said, unable to repress a smile at the mixture of shrewdness and *naïveté* in this girl who thus counted up her own and her countrymen's failings.

'I thought you were to make your first speech to-day, old chappie!' Lord Adair was meantime saying to Maurice.

'So I was, and so I have.'

'Was it well received?'

'I think so, on the whole.'

Maurice turned to Helen, preferring that her opinion of his performance, rather than his own, should be taken.

'I hope to goodness it will have some effect—it ought to be done!'

'Have you been speaking to-day, then?' said one of the irrepressible Republican

ladies, unable any longer to resist the temptation of addressing a baronet and a legislator, who had come as hot from a debate within the walls of the palace of Westminster, she afterwards recounted, as a hominy cake out of the oven.

Lord Adair, distressed to see the usages of society thus broken through, hastened to introduce the enthusiastic New Yorker to the youthful legislator.

Miss Chawner held out her hand to say good-bye to Helen, whispering confidentially,

‘Very green corn, ain’t they? I’ll bet you a cooky they’re introduced to *all* the House of Lords and half the House of Commons before we get home.’

The two parties separated—the tourists disappearing under the gloom of the archway, while Maurice accompanied Helen to her brougham.

The day after Maurice’s speech in the House, Margaret Perceval was sitting in her drawing-room at Eaton Place, taking a cup of afternoon tea with Mrs. Corbett,

when Laura Bellisle was announced. Judy, being at that moment taught to beg with a biscuit on her nose, jumped down and greeted the new-comer with a bark; while Mrs. Corbett, who had several times expressed to Margaret her dislike of the haughty beauty, rose and prepared to take her leave.

‘Don’t, please, run away on my account,’ said Laura indolently.

‘Thank you. I must be off. We have early dinner to-night. Mr. Corbett and I are going to the play.’

Margaret conducted her aunt to the door.

‘Can I not go, then, and see Florence?’ she asked, in pleading tones.

‘No. I am sure your uncle would be very angry if you did.’

‘But Maurice is so bitter and disagreeable about it.’

‘He cannot be very much in earnest on the subject, for he never cared much about—’

‘But he has taken a fancy now.’

Margaret laid a detaining hand on her aunt's arm.

'I can't help it. I can only tell you what I know to be the case.'

And Mrs. Corbett, kissing her on the forehead, went.

Margaret re-entered the room, and going listlessly to the tea-table, began to pour out a cup of tea.

'If that is for me, don't trouble—I don't want any, thank you ;' with a flutter of silk and lace, Laura, as she spoke, sank into a corner of the sofa opposite. 'You look unhappy, Margaret ; what is the matter ?'

'Nothing ; it is only about the Gordons.'

'What about them ?'

Margaret, like all shallow-minded women, was ever impelled in any difficulty to unburden herself to the person nearest her. She now began :

'You know how Maurice worries me always about not going to see the Gordons; and you know, on the other hand, how determined my uncle, Mr. Corbett, is that I should not do so.'

‘He disapproved of the marriage, didn’t he?’

‘Entirely! And Maurice is so reckless he will not remember the serious consequences it might entail upon us if we quarrelled with Uncle Corbett. Besides, he used not to be particularly attached to Florence when he first knew her. I don’t see why he should make such a point of our being intimate now.’

‘She is your sister, after all,’ retorted Laura sarcastically. ‘But what a curious coincidence! I came to see you this afternoon on this very subject. See, here is a letter I found lying between the leaves of the *Cornhill* you lent me out of Maurice’s study the other day. It is lucky it did not go back in it to “Mudie’s.”’

As she spoke, Laura opened her pocket-book, and, taking out a letter, handed it to Margaret.

‘I told you that foreign woman was not to be trusted.’

The letter was evidently hastily written,

and was not a remarkable one in any way.
It ran thus :

‘ DEAR SIR MAURICE,

‘ I shall be at home to tea this afternoon, and can meet you to-morrow at the Gordons’ at the hour you name.

‘ HÉLÈNE.’

Margaret said nothing, but looked up disconsolately at Laura.

‘ I don’t think the outline requires much filling in, does it ?’

‘ What do you mean, Laura ?’

‘ I mean what anyone else would under the circumstances. Here are you, a wife who has several times had reason to suspect your husband of—well, of more than flirting with another woman. It is ridiculous, Margaret ; even *you* must begin to suspect something serious at last. She has evidently run after Maurice ; and, like all men, he has allowed himself to be fooled. The very first evening, at Berkeley House, I remarked the sentimental way in which they met ; then, again, in that expedition

down the river. I can't understand how it is you have not made a fuss long ago. I know what I should have done had my husband refused to go out with me, and I had afterwards seen him with another woman in the Park. I know what I should have done had I seen my husband compromise himself as yours did here in this drawing-room the other day.'

'What would you do?—of course I have thought of that over and over again.' Margaret rose, and walked up and down the room. 'But I don't think for one moment Maurice would do that; and—and she is not a bit the sort of person you take her for.'

'Perhaps not; but that is the way people go on until one day they find their happiness destroyed and their home broken up.'

'Laura, how dare you!'

'My dear child, I am speaking for Maurice's good as much as for yours. Remember I am his cousin; I have known him since boyhood. He is just like other men, vain, and easily led. This flirtation has been going on for some time—long

before he married you. Perhaps if I were to tell you all I know, you would see how justified I am in my suspicions.'

'What do you want me to do?' asked poor Margaret, breaking down and beginning to cry.

'I don't want you to do anything, unless you feel yourself it is for the best. Only I must say I don't like to see two people I am fond of rushing to destruction, without raising a warning voice.'

'Ah, Laura! don't add to my misery! If you knew how wretched I have been at times about all this. In my calmer moments I have persuaded myself my fears were imaginary; but I, more than anyone, had reason to know there was something in it—for I have felt Maurice's love was not mine.'

'Come, come! I don't think it is so bad as that. Nevertheless were I you I should assert myself, and show him that you will not be made a fool of.'

'It is all very well to talk, Laura. You don't know what Maurice is.'

‘I do know perfectly what Maurice is. A coward, like all men : he will drop her directly he finds you are in earnest.’

‘What would you advise me to do ?’

‘I would advise you to show this woman plainly that you will not have her here, and that you will allow no more humbug.’

As Laura used this comprehensive phrase, she held out her hand to say ‘Good-bye.’

‘You are not going to leave me in this state of uncertainty?’

‘What can I do? I can only give you my advice.’ I should allow myself, if I were you, to be guided by circumstances.’

Mrs. Bellisle knew, as she spoke these words, that if Margaret had no other thread than the guidance of circumstances to lead her through the intricate mazes of the labyrinth of life, her weakness and want of judgment were likely to plunge her into many a danger and pitfall; but she went, volunteering no other advice.

‘What Laura says is quite true. Why did Maurice refuse to come with me to the Academy, and why was he walking with

her in the Park? Then here, the other afternoon, what was he saying so earnestly? Why should he keep her handkerchief? And now this letter. How dare he also arrange that she should be present to hear his first speech in Parliament and not me, his wife! Ah, he loved her—he loved her long before he loved me!

And the wretched wife, in these few words, sobbed out the whole of the saddest tragedy that is ever enacted in a woman's life.





CHAPTER VIII.

HE windows of one of those fairy palaces reared by the Rothschilds stood open, allowing the radiance of the brilliantly-lighted rooms to illumine the darker masses of foliage in the Park below. The roll of carriages, depositing their freight of silk, muslin, and tulle, mingled with the sounds of music; while the voice of the linkman rose in unison with the 'Ut de poitrine' of a famous singer. Within, was a murmur of voices and rustling of dresses. The warm air that came wafted through was laden with scent and pearl-powder. The ladies, seated on rows of chairs, looked like a parterre of flowers, with

the varied colours in their dresses, the precious stones that shone on their white necks, and their feather and ribbon-decked heads. The fans moved backwards and forwards in the warm atmosphere like wings ; their monotonous movement being interrupted only by the buzz of applause and clapping of gloved hands, that rustled through the room like the wind through a sunlit garden.

Helen felt in sympathy with her audience, and did justice to herself and it. When her performance was over, she listened with pleasure to the encomiums that were bestowed upon her. One voice, however, whose commendation she valued more than any other, was not heard ; and she looked round dissatisfied after the first enthusiasm was over.

Absently she took the arm of the high dignitary who was deputed by the master of the house to conduct her to supper. They passed through a passage lined on either side with people seated in the recesses of the windows or against the wall, who stared at the young actress as she

passed, and then made observations in a low voice. Close to the supper-room she saw Margaret Perceval, seated beside Lord Hopkins. Quitting the arm on which she leant, Helen went a few steps towards her, and held out her hand. What was her surprise to see the woman who, until now, had declared herself her friend, turn away with a few murmured words of the coldest salutation. For one second she felt as though a chasm had opened at her feet. Recovering herself almost immediately, however, she passed on into the supper-room, and stood dazed opposite the table glittering with silver and glass, and laden with the most elaborate efforts of culinary skill. Her companion's offers of quails, ortolans, plovers' eggs, anything he could tempt her with, she hardly understood. When at last, as a matter of form, she accepted something, it was impossible to swallow it. The only thing she cared for was a glass of water. She seemed to be floating in a fiery sea, and longed for something to quench her thirst. How dared Margaret so insult her before

everyone! And poor Helen turned to see if her neighbour had noticed the indignity. If he had, he succeeded in not showing the fact under his impassible foreign courtesy. When offended pride and bitter resentment have entered a passionate heart like our heroine's, woe betide those who have aroused them! Her pride was as Lucifer's; and her resentment, like that of all generous women unjustly suspected, wild and unreasoning.

Weak, silly Margaret little knew the forces she had set at work. As Helen stood there, looking, as though in a dream, at the sumptuous, flower-decked table, and listening to the murmur of voices and laughter round her, she suddenly dissociated her thoughts from exterior consciousness, and summed up cause and effect unerringly. The result of her meditation was an insidious, dangerous regret—one of those feelings that makes a woman say :

‘What was the good of all my self-sacrifice? How have I benefited him or

myself? I have been slandered, misunderstood — my best intentions and wishes wrongly interpreted. I will now become selfish—egotistical. I will think of nothing but my own happiness and my own enjoyment, at the expense of everything. They may turn the whole world against me. They may take all my friends away. I can stand by myself, and with the companionship of my work and art, defy them all. I will cut Margaret, Laura Bellisle—yea! and Sir Maurice too. I will teach them that they cannot insult me with impunity.'

The power of dissimulation lies dormant in all women, and only needs calling out by the exigencies of social life. Until now Helen had acted to amuse other people; she now acted to hide her own agitation.

'Would not madame have anything else? She must be so tired after the efforts she had made to delight them all,' inquired her companion.

'No, thank you,' she answered, with her sweetest smile. 'I think it is almost time for me to go now.'

Taking his arm, they passed down the room. Suddenly Helen started, having caught sight of Laura standing talking to an illustrious person, at the end towards which they were going. She was only perturbed for an instant; and sweeping on with the bearing of a queen, courtesied in answer to the Prince's salutation, and passed into the gallery beyond without any acknowledgment of Laura's presence.

'Who was that beautiful lady,' asked her conductor, 'who looked as if she would like to put a dagger into somebody?'

He looked at Helen meaningly as he spoke.

A few days after, at breakfast—her usual time for receiving disagreeable communications—Helen found, amongst others lying on her plate, a letter from Margaret. She read it, tingling with indignation, and jumping up, rang the bell.

'Go down and ask Mr. Ferrers to come up to me,' she said to the little maid when

she appeared; and then added quickly, ‘If Sir Maurice, Lady Perceval, or Mrs. Bellisle should call to-day, or any day, please remember, Anne, I am not at home.’

So soon as her uncle entered, Helen handed him Margaret’s letter, saying, with a bitter smile :

‘I think she might have spared me this—don’t you?’

When he had read the letter, he asked quickly :

‘When did this come?’

‘About half an hour ago.’

‘You must not blame her. She has been driven wild by that woman. According to the judgment I have formed of her, Lady Perceval is a silly, weak woman. Would to God the other one were the same! I told you from the first she is her mother’s daughter—faithless in love and uncompromising in hate. If I mistake not, she belongs to that large section of female fashionable society which I may designate as the “undetected,” and cannot bear to see

any woman better than herself. Then she is in love with this man.'

'Who?' asked Helen, startled out of herself.

'Sir Maurice Perceval.'

There was silence for a moment; then Laurence went on:

'Now that you have spoken to me, my child, I will tell you what I heard at the Eclectic the other night. It was the talk of all the members. You will then be able to put two and two together.'

'Why should I need to put two and two together? What does it matter? Let them do their worst!'

'It does matter, and I will not allow that woman to do her worst. Let me tell you what they say at the club.'

Helen resigned herself with a sigh, and he continued:

'It seems that after the party at Rothschild's, there was a paragraph in one of the society papers, in which your recitations were criticized very unfavourably; and the writer proceeded to tell as much of your

private history as they knew, laying aspersions on your mother's character, and dishing up a very piquant piece of scandal for the jaded palates of its readers. Sir Maurice Perceval saw it, and, with more impulsiveness than wisdom, went to the office of the paper in question, walked straight into the editor's room, and insisted on his giving up the name of the writer of the article. The editor necessarily refused to do so, until Sir Maurice, blazing into a white heat of passion, threatened to use force. They say when he is in one of those humours, Sir Maurice is not good to face.'

Helen, now no longer languid or uninterested, was leaning forward, listening eagerly.

'I cannot tell whether Perceval used moral or physical force to shake the fellow's determination—rumour says physical—but the statement was at last tauntingly cast in his teeth that it was a near relation of his own who had sent the contribution,

and that every statement contained in it was made on the best authority.

‘ Before he left the office, Sir Maurice received a promise that the circulation of the paper containing the article should be stopped so far as possible. Thus the matter, I believe, stands. The editor may have tried to withdraw as many numbers as he could, and to sell no more ; but I have seen it everywhere, and I know the sale of the publication has increased enormously since the *fracas*—the public having, of course, added many fabulous additions of their own to the story; so that is the only reward Sir Maurice has got for allowing impulse to overpower his more sober reason.’

‘ Poor mother ! What did they say of her, uncle ?’

‘ They said that her marriage was never legalized—that she married you to your first husband without telling of your illegitimacy, and that when he first heard the truth, he wished to declare the marriage void. You know the sort of stuff that is cooked up. The editor has no particularly

inimical feeling against you, but he must get a certain circulation every week; and he does not care at whose expense it is procured!'

'Who could have been the author of it?'

'The author, or rather the instigator, was beyond doubt Laura Bellisle.'

'Why should she persecute me like this?'

Helen looked up, pale and appealing, into the mournful face beside her.

'My dear, to be much hated, a woman must be much loved; and I saw from the first how it would be. You did not hear my voice mix much in the conversation that day we went down the river; but I was observing everything, and I knew there would be a catastrophe.'

'Why didn't you warn me?'

'You know my principle of never interfering in other people's concerns. And what was the good? It would only have precipitated what has come. I watched Sir Maurice's manner to his wife. I watched

his manner to you. I saw straight into Laura Bellisle's very soul, aided by an experience she hardly dreamt of. That man loves you. I cannot tell what has passed between you, but I think I can guess.'

'I don't think so. I really don't think so,' she said, clasping her hands. 'I have tried to build up a strong friendship out of our love—a friendship that would have endured all our lives, and beyond the grave. I could have been of so much use to him. I saw the danger of his and Margaret's intimacy with Laura. I could have protected them, especially with the knowledge you had given me.'

'Friendship! Never will you turn his feeling for you into friendship.'

'I will not give up the hope, at all events. No mean-minded, jealous woman shall cut me off from one of the few happinesses I enjoy.'

'Try the experiment, my child; but I warn you, that in the end will be failure. And I do not think you are the sort of

woman to persevere in any course of action, that would wreck the happiness of those you care for.'

'We shall see! I owe nothing to anybody but you and my mother, and—yes, perhaps to him. Do you think, then, that Laura Bellisle cared for him?'

'Yes; and loves him now with what she calls love.'

'And he? Has he—loved her?'

'My child, we men are strange creatures! Most likely. I should not be astonished if he cared for her again on account of what she has done for his sake. Ah, that marriage of his was a great mistake.'

'That's but poor comfort under the circumstances.'

'Meantime, what do you intend to do?'

'I have told the servant, if Lady Perceval, Laura Bellisle, or Sir Maurice came, to say I was out. I shall now change that order, and inform her that it only stands good in the case of the two former. They will find they cannot with impunity rouse the De Carrel blood.'

Two red spots burnt on her cheeks as she spoke.

Why was it that she did not carry out the threat she made so bravely, and left the order she had already given unaltered?





CHAPTER IX.

A DAY or two after her conversation with Laurence Ferrers, Helen was sitting alone in the drawing-room of Russell Place studying a new part for recitation. Although the afternoon was far advanced, her mother was not yet up. She had been complaining all day; and this the first moment of leisure Helen had been able to obtain, when she would have so gladly rested from her fatigue, had to be devoted to work.

The tinkling of a bell resounded through the stillness; she did not hear it. There were voices in the passage, the voice of a man answering the servant-girl; steps on

the stairs. She only started and looked up when the door opened, and Sir Maurice Perceval entered the room.

‘Sir Maurice!’ she exclaimed, letting the book fall in her lap, and making an attempt to rise.

‘Please don’t,’ he said, coming forward hastily. ‘I hope I am not disturbing you. I ventured to come in in spite of your servant; I knew you were at home. I hardly dare ask whether what I have done is right or wrong; the temptation was too strong. I have something important to say to you.’

‘Yes?’ said Helen interrogatively, with an intonation of voice that would have daunted one less absorbed in the business that had brought him.

‘You will shake hands with me?’

‘Certainly; why not?’

He endeavoured to retain for one second the hand she held out to him.

‘Won’t you sit down?’ sinking back as she spoke, her face looking pale and thin against the cushion of the chair.

‘ You are not well! I am boring you. Let me go away and return some other day.’

‘ No, no—pray don’t. I was only reading up a part; I am a little tired. But have some tea; the servant will get it in a moment if you will ring the bell.’

‘ Thank you, no. I am afraid I can only stop a short time. As I told you, I hesitated about coming; but at last I thought it best for all parties that I should.’

‘ Best for all parties!’ she re-echoed cynically to herself, but sat silent as he went on.

‘ You received a letter from Lady Perceval, I think?’

‘ I received a letter, yes; from your wife.’

‘ In which she accuses you——’

‘ In which she accuses me of having deceived her!—of having played a double game!—of having deprived her of your affection!—in fact, of being a traitress and an adventuress!’ As she spoke, the indignation which she had felt on perusing the

communication, and which she thought past, blazed forth anew, and she went on quickly : ‘ It was the letter which an angry, jealous, irresponsible woman might write to another who had deeply wronged her ; but the excuse I make for your wife is that I think the production was not entirely her own. In fact, I can detect traces of another hand in every line of it ! ’

‘ And that other ? ’

‘ Is your cousin, Mrs. Bellisle ! ’ In her excitement Helen rose, facing him with flashing eyes and flushed cheeks.

‘ Will you ever forgive me ? ’ he said, bending forward, and bowing his head.

‘ Forgive you ? What had you to do with it ? Anyone, however innocent, may be in the power of a jealous woman ! ’

‘ Ah, but I *am* to blame ! It is a long story ; have you the patience to listen to me ? ’

‘ Yes ; go on ; ’ and she restlessly tapped with her hand on the mantelshelf as she spoke.

‘ You remember,’ he continued, taking

the permission so grudgingly given, ‘that day you went to the House to hear me speak?’

‘Yes.’

‘I am sure I did not think there was any harm in the proceeding. Did you?’

‘You ought not to have done it. I was very much annoyed when I found Lady Perceval was not there.’

‘Then, I see, you will blame me for the whole thing.’

‘I will not blame you, because I think you acted without counting the consequences.’

‘You absolve me, then, from having intended any harm? Of course I wanted you more than anyone else in the world to hear my first speech. What do women like that know about it?’

‘Hush, hush, Sir Maurice! you must not. But how was it that that day produced such important consequences?’

Forced into calmness by her voice, gentle and low as it was, he went on: ‘You remember we met Miss Chawner with Lord

Adair, and a lot of people, as we were coming out?"

"And she, I suppose, told Mrs. Bellisle."

"The girl, perfectly innocently and frankly, let Laura know when she went home that they had met us. For what reason I cannot say, my cousin went and told Margaret, and the mischief was done. When I returned home that evening I met a storm which, until then, I should have thought my wife perfectly incapable of raising. She accused me of never having loved her, of having married her for money, while all the time I was in love with you. Ah, it was terrible to hear!" Maurice's voice grew husky as he recalled the scene to memory.

Helen said nothing; she was now enabled in thought to fill in the outline of what had taken place. And she stood listening, full of pity, almost putting her own personality out of the story.

"You know what the Perceval temper is? She said such atrocious things, that I turned on her and told her it was per-

factly true—that I had never loved her—that I had proposed to you—that you had refused me, and that I had married her from pique!'

The young woman caught her breath.

' You met her that night at Rothschild's. She cut you, so did Laura—I know it all, although I myself did not dare to go. I walked up and down the Park outside the lighted windows, tortured by the thought of what was taking place within. Then there was that paragraph in that hateful paper! Did you hear of it?'

' Yes, I heard of it.'

' No pain has been spared you, then?'

' None.'

' And I am making you suffer it all over again?'

' Never mind ; go on. You went to see the editor—I know all that.'

' Yes, I went to see the editor, and he told me his information had come from a near relation of my own. Of course I guessed directly it was Laura Bellisle. I have done many bad things in my life'—and

as he spoke he rose and stood solemnly opposite her—‘but I never before felt so desperate and reckless. That she should have raised her hand against you—that she should have endeavoured to destroy your reputation and wound you in your tenderest affections! In the first white heat of rage she told me that she had made Margaret—silly, weak Margaret!—write a letter to you. She told me the purport of that letter, and how it had hurt and stung you. I spoke to her then as I never spoke to a woman before, and as I hope never to speak to a woman again. I forbade her ever to enter my wife’s house. I told her that I would make the whole story public, and would let society know, if she did not leave London immediately, that she was a woman who slandered others to serve her own base ends. And yet, if she but knew, though I was so angry, I felt she had rendered me the greatest service in her power ; do you know how?’

She said nothing, and he went on, lowering his voice :

‘ Since I saw that paragraph in the paper my eyes have been opened. I understand now why you would not accept my love—for you have loved me! Ah! tell me that you have loved me. All is known and open between you and me now. You would not tell me the reason then on account of your mother. But tell me now, just once !’

As he spoke he bent his handsome face towards her, and laid his hand eagerly on hers. The touch thrilled through him from head to foot ; he looked into her eyes, and knew that she felt it too.

‘ It is not fair—you have no right to ask such a question,’ she murmured, endeavouring to move farther from him.

‘ At this juncture in our lives anything is fair. Your love is above everything to me—I would sacrifice friends, ambition, life, to hear you say once that you love me as I love you. It would make a different man of me ; I would bear the tortures of existence unflinchingly ; I would strive to do what I could to make Margaret happy, if

'ou will confide the secret of your heart
o me, and make that confession once—only
nce.'

There was silence for some seconds.

' Yes, Maurice, I loved you. Ah! how I
oved you !'

She sighed rather than spoke ; and then,
as if the effort to resist any longer were too
much for her strength, she let her head sink
on his shoulder, her features quivering, her
eyes brimming over with tears. He drank
in the words, and catching her tone, whis-
pered softly :

' What induced you, then, to throw away
both our lives so utterly—so hopelessly ?'

' I did it because I loved you. I am not
a high-minded or self-sacrificing woman,
but I cared for you unselfishly.'

' And you care for me now ? Helen,
you love me now ?'

' Yes, I love you now.' Her voice
altered and broke down for a second. ' I
ried—ah ! I tried hard—to change my
affection into friendship—into a feeling
which could do harm neither to your wife

nor to us. But you see it was fated not to be.'

The only indication that he had of her face as she spoke was the halo of dusky hair that surrounded it and caught the light; otherwise he might have been silenced by the sight of her grief. As it was, with all a man's persistence, he went on :

'Tell me all your reasons for rejecting my love.'

'Your mother ! What would she have said to a daughter-in-law of illegitimate birth, with no money, and of an alien religion which she detested ? In the course of conversations with her I ascertained all her prejudices, and also the state of your affairs, and knew that you would have been obliged to leave Stourton if you did not marry an heiress. Had you asked me twenty times over to marry you, I would not have done so, especially as I was aware also of the feeling Margaret Corbett had for you. I was no longer a young girl when I met you, but a woman with all a woman's power of weighing consequences ; and I faced

distinctly the unhappiness I should have brought on everyone if I had listened to my heart.'

Maurice stood silent, reading the soul of this woman for the first time.

' You would have made my career.'

' I think not. Besides, I hoped you would have been happy with Margaret, and was mistaken. But we must try now and make the best of the position.'

' You ruined my life and your own.'

' You would have been miserable had you had your way, hampered with a delicate wife, driven from your home.'

' And what am I now ? You renounced all happiness. Why ? That these women might taunt you, and destroy your reputation ; while I am a wretched, desperate human being. This is the outcome of your self-sacrifice.'

' It is too late for us to say this now.'

' Yes, I am afraid it is,' he answered sadly; and then added, ' When may I come and see you again ?'

' How can I say ? Everything separates us.'

‘Nothing separates us but our own perversity. Your good sense as well as mine protests against the social laws which lay an embargo upon our intercourse.’

‘And Margaret?’

‘Why should we consider her opinion? She has done the cruellest thing that one woman can do to another. Laura of course told her of your mother’s marriage long ago. They kept the knowledge to themselves, that they might make use of it to stab you like cowards when you least expected it. As to the rest of society, what need we care what they say? Give me your friendship, Helen. Don’t leave me alone to my misery. You love me. You have loved me as I have loved you from the time I first knew you. Why should we both endeavour to continue an impossible life?—for my life has been impossible for some time, and these latter events have only brought things to a crisis. We need never openly offend the prejudices of those we live amongst, but we can beautify one another’s lives, and taste all the happiness

which has been hitherto denied us. Let me go to Canada now, knowing that I bear your love with me, and a divine promise for the future. If you consent, I will come back in the spring to Margaret. I will make her as happy as lies within my power; but you will be the guiding star of my life. All my successes, all my reverses, will be yours and mine to bear together. Promise me this—ah, promise me this!

She put up her hands, and endeavoured to turn away: ‘I promise to care for you all my life. You must go now. I have my work to do.’

‘ You recite at the French Embassy on Friday, don’t you? I am going. I got an invitation on purpose.’

‘ Mrs. Bellisle and Margaret, will be there.’

‘ I don’t think they will. If there’s one person in the world Laura is afraid of, it’s me; and Margaret has gone, I think, to Stourton.’

‘ But all the other people! Fancy how this affair will be talked of!’ She put her hand before her face with a shiver.

'Not so much as you imagine. I stopped that paragraph in the paper before it had gone far.'

She smiled doubtfully.

'I am afraid news like that travels fast. A woman's reputation is rather like Humpty-Dumpty: "all the king's horses and all the king's men cannot put it together again," once it is destroyed.'

'Don't make me more miserable than I am.'

'I did not mean to; only I think women are infinitely more susceptible to the opinion of the world than men. We weaker vessels are dependent on our reputation for all that makes life not only agreeable but tolerable.'

'There is such a thing as justice.'

'Justice is not a quality to be expected of society,' she said with a sad smile.

There was the sound of a door shutting, of a footstep outside.

'Go, I implore you—go,' she pleaded.

'I have a great deal more to say to you. May I come to-morrow?'

‘Yes, come to-morrow; but only on one understanding, that you never again speak to me as you have to-day. We are to be good friends, nothing more; and the first mention of any other feeling must inevitably put an end to my seeing you.’

The conditions were heavy, but weighted with such gladdening possibilities that he accepted them unhesitatingly.

Helen would have been startled, however, had she known Maurice’s thoughts when he left her. He had made women his study for a great portion of his life. Those who knew him best would have told you that his relations with the other sex were the least commendable thing about him. They whispered that he had been fickle, heartless, and too fond of seeing the charms of his neighbour’s wife; and then, when his neighbour’s wife had been won, of leaving her for some new face. Whether it were true or not, he certainly never had seen a woman for whom he would have made a great and permanent sacrifice until he had met Helen. When she refused

that sacrifice, and rejected his love, he imagined she had been actuated by no more exalted motive than because she did not love him. Now that he knew the real reason, and recognised what manner of woman she was, the passion he thought almost forgotten flamed out more strongly than ever.

As to Margaret, the very thought of her came upon him like a bleak easterly wind after a day of sunshine and warmth. To see her now, would be impossible. Some time in the future perhaps, when he had secured Helen's allegiance irrevocably, he might agree to a reconciliation ; but he relegated the thought to the regions of distant possibilities, and yielded himself unreservedly to his present dream of happiness.





CHAPTER X.

“As you like” is a bad finger-post.’

THE best music must be repeatedly studied and listened to as a whole ere it can be understood, and then gradually the counterpoint and rhythm becomes plain; and we see the science and intention that has guided the master-hand. How much more so, then, the complex harmonies and feelings that we call our lives!

We hear one note in the strain of men’s destiny, and think we understand the construction of the whole. Alas! we must hear consecutive staves—sometimes even the closing chords, before we can understand either the discord or harmony that has by chance become audible to us. If

this be the case with most lives, how much more will it be true of those emotional, passionate natures which are carried hither and thither by the impulse of the moment—which, in their inconsistency and weakness, are incapable of computing the consequences of their actions! As well endeavour to predict the course of the clouds as they sweep across the sky, or the course of the feathery thistledown as it floats above the meadows in the early autumn days. We only know that the cloud gathers and falls in rain; and the seed, scattered by the wind, alights and sows a crop which in the world of emotion men reap, and call the ‘whirlwind.’

Helen had had the unselfishness to give up Maurice because she would have done him an imaginary wrong by becoming his wife; and now she prepared to do herself and him all the harm she could, in the impetuosity of her unreasoning indignation. Who shall say whether it was pique against the woman who had wrought this irreparable wrong, or the pent-up passion of her heart, that now had no barrier to stop

its current, and went out towards him to whom her whole being had been given the first time she saw him. Whatever the motive-power may have been, she now allowed herself to see Sir Maurice frequently. The ‘Rubicon,’ as we are told, was an insignificant stream to look at. Its significance lay entirely in certain ‘invisible conditions.’ Those ‘invisible conditions’ no longer existed for Helen, and once on the other side, there seemed to be no let or hindrance to her onward course.

He came every day to Russell Place. There was a spell of fine weather, and the little room became to them both an enchanted land full of golden sunshine and the old familiar glamour that had shed such a radiance on the woods and lanes of Stourton. They would sit and talk—she of her profession, he of his politics—while the young artist worked, either with her needle or her paint-brush.

Sometimes they sang, but seldom; for Madame de Carrel could not bear the music. If you had asked them, they

would neither have been able to tell how the hours passed. They had both drunk of the 'Lotos wine' the poets tell us of, and were dead to the lapse of time while they were together.

In a few days they had discounted all past renunciation. If she allowed any retrospection it was only for a moment; and then the fresh new life within her would begin to awake, and before the vigour of its pulsation would silence all misgiving.

After all, to whom was she answerable for her behaviour? Had not those to whom she had acted best cast her forth? How was she bound to anyone but to him and her own happiness?

There was nothing to disturb their day-dream. Madame de Carrel spent almost the entire day in bed, only getting up of an evening and creeping into the sitting-room in her dressing-gown.

Laurence Ferrers was not a person to interfere: he would talk art and philosophy by the hour, but rarely lifted his voice upon the manner of his neighbour's conduct of

life. He had instinctive likes and dislikes, as in the case of Laura Bellisle; but in the ordinary way, never enforced his views on anyone. Like those first occupants of Eden, and like so many human beings since, the two wandered through the garden of life, fully conscious of the existence of the sense of the knowledge of good and evil, and the angel with the flaming sword, but choosing to shut their eyes and ignore the dangers and perils. He knew they loved one another, but the confession that had been made remained locked away in a chamber of his heart. There was a tacit understanding that it never should be mentioned.

He was studiously respectful in manner, and she went through a perfect 'comedy of dissimulation' with herself. Nothing, she would declare secretly, was changed in their intercourse since the first happy days at Stourton; and nothing was changed except her own heart. Then there always remained in her mind the memory of his intended departure, as a prospective solution and haven of safety.

Sometimes she became frightened when she did not hear him speak so determinately of carrying out his suggestion.

'I will send him—yes, he shall go, and then it will all be over. When he comes back, Margaret will be more reasonable. He will have got to love her better, and I—ah, well! this chapter shall be closed for ever.'

For a day or two she was on her guard, showing by her exaggerated reserve the fear she felt. She would not shake hands. By the abruptness of her manner she showed him that she did not care about his sitting at her little table, touching the bright-coloured silk, or preparing the paints she was going to use, or the hundred trivial intimacies brought about by their constant intercourse. He would bear her caprice patiently for a time; and then, by a gesture and inflexion of voice, break down the barriers and gently lead her back to her former confident fellowship.

Although Maurice never mentioned his love, many things he said had a double

meaning for her ; and sometimes involuntarily he would catch her eyes, a light would flash between them, and they saw straight down into one another's hearts ; and then a delicious moment of silence would follow — a moment when lovers fathom the full depth of their passion more completely than in hours of talk.

They seldom reverted to the past. Sometimes he said laughingly, ‘Do you remember that day you bullied me about your religion?’ or, ‘Do you remember that horrible night of the concert, when you would not look at me?’ as if such disagreeable memories belonged to a previous state of unhappiness entirely at variance with their present serenity. Once he asked her suddenly:

‘Why did you never answer that letter I wrote you in the summer? Ah, if you only had done so, what unhappiness you might have saved us all!’

‘Please don’t,’ she said, putting up her hands. ‘I cannot bear to go back to the past.’

She never allowed him, either, to make

selfish demands on her sympathy by complaining of his wife.

' Margaret cannot change her nature,' she would say. ' You ought to make the best of it.'

' So you think she was justified in treating you as she did?'

' I think she was in the hands of a stronger will than her own.'

He sometimes indulged in bursts of indignation against his cousin, which almost frightened her, and which it was useless to endeavour to check.

It seemed so natural to Helen to hold communion with him as she did, that she never saw his faults ; it seemed so right for her to sacrifice all for him, that she never saw his selfishness. Where will the man ever be found who loves a woman so well that he will not accept a woman's life if she gives it him ?

Maurice, sure of the ultimate end of the whole thing, certain of the prize within his grasp, did not think it wise to show any undue haste in endeavouring to take posses-

sion of it. Unfortunately for himself and her, he did not understand the character with whom he had to deal. She was like the rest of her sex, he thought; rather more capricious, wayward, and sensitive, and certainly more lovable. He did not see, that by an impulse the other way, Helen, on the very edge of the precipice, would draw back and retrace the steps that had so nearly brought her to destruction. Like all women of her nature, she was capable of either great nobility or passionate illiberality of action. She had refused the man she loved from high-strung notions of honour; and now, from jealousy and pique, was neutralizing the effects of her self-sacrifice. The atmosphere around her was dark and heavy with the electricity and storm of indignation; and the farther she went down the hill the thicker the mists became, until at last the very road at her feet was enveloped in clouds. It needed the bursting of the tempest to clear the air, and restore purity and brightness to her spiritual vision.

The entertainment at the French Embassy was for charity, and Helen had offered her services gratis. From the moment the young artist entered the room, she felt a cold disapproval in the attitude of everyone towards her. Even her hostess, who until now had taken a kindly interest in her countrywoman, was distant and frigid in manner. Maurice had over-estimated his power when he imagined that Laura Bellisle would listen to his command and leave London. The first thing Helen caught sight of when she rose to recite was the diamond-crowned head with its coil of dark hair, and the beautiful face with its flashing eyes and disdainful mouth. She was surrounded, as usual, by a crowd of that well-known class of men who think it 'the thing, you know,' to pay court to every fashionable beauty as she ascends into the rarefied atmosphere of aristocratic society.

The young artist knew immediately that her presence was a declaration of hostilities. The glove was thrown down by her antago-

nist, and the descendant of the De Carrels was the last person to refuse to take it up. Open defiance, to her audience as well, lay in the manner in which she gave the last lines of the poem of Alfred de Musset which she recited:

'Est-ce que l'absurde vulgaire
Peut tout déshonorer sur terre,
Au gré d'un cuitre ou d'un maçon ?'

When she sat down there was considerable applause; but an ironical smile rested on the faces of many, and no one, as was usually the case, came forward to request an introduction, and offer their congratulations.

Partly with trepidation, partly with pleasure, she saw Sir Maurice Perceval approach the place where she sat leaning back in a long low chair; a background of pink azalea-blossoms making a fitting background to the small graceful head. Her hands were folded on her lap, her eyes were sparkling, a flush as delicate as the flowers behind her dyed her cheek, while the throbbing of her heart stirred the lace at her throat.

'I feel as if the audience were a tiger sucking my life-blood,' she almost panted as he sat down.

'I wish you would give up this reciting,' bending over her with a sense of possession.

'Why?'

'Because I can't bear to think of your giving your soul to these people.'

'That is all very well; but if I did give it up, how are I and my mother to live?'

'I—could——' He stopped suddenly, and then went on feverishly. 'Grant me at least one request.'

'What is it?' she asked, in a humour to grant anything he might ask.

'Give up everything to-morrow, and come down the river to see my yacht; she is lying off Gravesend. The Gordons have promised to honour me with a visit.'

'Could I go with them?'

'Of course; you could meet them at Charing Cross Station. The eleven o'clock train is the best, but they run every hour. I unfortunately have to go down early in

the morning to prepare things. You must not expect much—it is only a cockle-shell ; but Gordon wanted to make some studies on the river, so I asked him the other day to come to-morrow. It would make the party complete if you say you will join us.'

'I shall be very happy. Eleven o'clock, and it gets down in an hour?'

'Yes, eleven o'clock from the Gravesend platform.'

They both turned at that moment, attracted by some influence stronger than themselves, and caught Laura Bellisle's eyes fixed on them.

Mrs. Bellisle was using weapons of which she thoroughly understood the management. When her cousin told her to leave London on penalty of his publishing her transgressions to the world, she knew he was saying what he dared not perform.

Maurice had made a blunder in interviewing the editor of the paper in which the paragraph concerning Helen had appeared. She and all London knew that as well as her cousin himself. The story had been re-

peated everywhere, with numerous interpolations and additions ; in fact, there was no end to the whisperings and surmises his action had caused.

It was known that Maurice had had a misunderstanding with his wife on the subject, and Helen was, for the time being, a noticeable person amidst the various circles of society in which she moved. Her success had naturally made her enemies, and she could not have played better into their hands than she was at present doing.

‘ Women are infinitely more susceptible to the opinions of the world than men,’ she had said ; and yet she was wantonly outraging every social law, and setting the world in arms against her to gratify a moment’s pique.

Laura’s name did not, either, escape unfavourable mention. To this, however, she was completely indifferent, now that she was embarked on her reckless career.

What had made her reckless if not the man who was now her bitterest foe ? Those who judged her most harshly for the twenty-four hours during which the scandal

agitated the London world might have been more lenient had they known all that had gone before in the relations between the cousins.

Sir Maurice, where a woman was concerned, was often to blame ; and was now perhaps only paying the just penalty of his errors.

There was an easy morality among the class in which he moved—an idea that love justifies all self-indulgence—that perhaps blinded him to the real position of affairs. He believed what he felt for Helen to be love : he thought he would have died, he knew he would have given up home, friends, position, for her sake. There was just one thing he could not renounce, and that was the gratification of intercourse with the woman he loved, although he knew that intercourse had but one end : destruction of her happiness and good name.

When the concert was over, Sir Maurice took Helen to her carriage, and as he shook hands, begged her to be at Charing Cross

at eleven next morning ; then turning away, he lit a cigar and sauntered into the Park. The sound of her voice, the touch of her hand still lingering in his memory, he gave himself over to the ecstasy of his perverse love-dream. He had the material portion of the poetic temperament that converts beautiful things into a source of sensual intoxication.

Laura Bellisle, who had left at the same time as Helen and her cousin, watched them go out together, and writing to Margaret next day, informed her of what she had seen.





CHAPTER XI.

'Près du ruisseau, quand nous marchions ensemble,
Le soir sur le sable argentin,
Quand devant nous le blanc spectre du tremble
De loin nous montrait le chemin.'

HELEN arrived on the platform of the station at the hour named. She looked graceful and pretty, in her simple blue and white dress made of a light clinging material, and tiny straw bonnet with its blue gauze strings. In spite of her defiance she had been unhappy the evening before at the Embassy; and proof as she imagined herself against any insult, she could not be wholly indifferent to the censure of those with whom she was in the habit of associating. Now, however, all disagreeable thoughts were forgotten. The soft July breeze was

bearing wafts of country air into the dusty station ; the great open archway at the end seemed an exit opening on a golden world of brightness and happiness. She walked up the platform, feeling jubilant and happy as she looked around for her travelling companions. The Gordons were favourites of hers—they were so unsophisticated in their artistic affectations, and so sillily and naively in love with one another. She enjoyed the prospect of some hours spent in their company. Then was she not going also to sail about on a sunny sea, for one whole long day, in company with him who represented all the joy and brightness of her life ?—let what might come afterwards, she would always have enjoyed that. Her mother had seemed better that morning, too ; and when she had been told by her daughter that she proposed taking a sail in company with the Gordons on Sir Maurice's yacht, had not been so loth as usual to let her go.

Helen felt a sense of release and freedom, therefore : all anxieties were left behind,

and the golden minutes and hours of the day to come stretched in kaleidoscopic vista before her. She thought the noise of the train delightful, and the dusty platform might have been the softest turf. The gladness in her heart made music of discordant sounds, and the gladness in her feet made the hard stone soft and springy. Meantime where were the Gordons?—it was three minutes to the starting of the train; the porters were shutting the doors—they must have already arrived and got in. She walked along by the carriages—no Gordons were to be seen. Sir Maurice said, however, that the trains went every half hour—they had perhaps chosen an earlier one, or would come by the next; so, obliged to make up her mind decidedly one way or the other, she jumped into the first empty compartment, and was soon being whirled away towards the silver stretches of the river. Sir Maurice met her at the station at Gravesend.

‘Where are the Gordons?’

‘I have received a telegram to say the

baby is not well, but they hope to be here by the twelve o'clock train.'

Helen looked a little blank.

'Never mind, we can go down to the boat ; they know all about it, and can find their way.' He took her arm in his decided fashion as he spoke, and they started off.

The air was balmy and soft, with just enough of the salt savour of the sea in it to mitigate the languid warmth of the July sun. The shining sands, the undulating downs, the wide stretch of rushing river, were all new and delightful to Helen. She sat on deck beneath the shade of a red umbrella, asking numberless questions which it would have been impossible for Sir Maurice to answer satisfactorily, entirely forgetting, amidst the novelty of the scene, the non-arrival of the Gordons.

When the boat that had been sent to meet them returned, the coxswain handed a yellow envelope to Sir Maurice, saying :

'There was no one at the station, but I was given that by a telegraph boy at the landing-stage.'

She asked with a startled voice :
‘Haven’t they come?’

‘No ; I am sorry to say the child is too ill.’ Her host had not yet seen fit to inform her that in the first telegram Mr. Gordon had told him that Florence certainly could not leave the child. This latter intimation was therefore not so great a surprise to him as to his companion. ‘But you will not desert me, will you, Countess de Ferrin?’ he said, turning to Helen.

‘I am afraid I must,’ she answered, closing her parasol and rising.

‘Now that you are here, you will surely have a little sail?’

‘I am afraid I cannot.’

‘Why?’

‘I should not like to.’

‘I know the reason why, but life is short; let us make the most of it. Besides, the tide is running too strong; I can’t put you on shore just now. And surely you will eat some of the lunch I have been at such pains to prepare for you.’

'But my mother?'

'Your mother knows that you were to spend the day on the river. You will upset her much more if you go home unexpectedly; but, under any circumstances, you must come down and have a look at the yacht.'

A yacht is peculiarly the impersonation of English luxury, everything first-rate, beautifully appointed, with as little outward show as possible. In a small way, Maurice's was all this, with its polished woodwork, Eastern carpets, luxurious divans, and well-bound books. Helen, as she lingered in this congenial atmosphere, forgot how time slipped away, until it was one o'clock ; then she was persuaded to stop for lunch; and after lunch, she allowed herself to be convinced that the best way to pass the afternoon, was to drop down the river with the tide and return again in time to catch an evening train.

Can anything more delightful be conceived than to drift along the broad stretches

of the river towards the sea, thinking of no one in the world but the person beside you? the white sails quivering in the breeze; the red-capped sailors crooning their monotonous song as they pull the ropes; while the ‘burgee’ up aloft stands out bright against a deep blue heaven, innocent of the suspicion of a cloud. The earth and sky trembled in a haze of yellow and blue, and Helen and Maurice floated noiselessly between the two; only conscious of the presence of the earth by the wafts of faint perfume that came borne across the water; only conscious of the sky by the shower of warm rays that fell on them, thrilling them like a caress as they sat in blissful indolence on deck.

Let those believe it who may, Helen, in her intercourse with Maurice, still cherished one of those irrational, unfeasible dreams that she could keep him as a friend and not as a lover. He had been the first and only man who had awokened her life as a woman. She loved him as the opening flower loves the sun-

light, and the thirsty earth the rain. Hers, however, was a spiritual, intangible sentiment ; a feeling that, although in her heart of hearts she bowed down before him as the lord and disposer of her destiny—though the sound of his voice, chiming in with the ripple of the water, was to her the sweetest music in the world—there was a sense of infinitude and peace in her heart that separated her emotion from anything unworthy or blamable. They read, they talked, they had tea, and then read and talked again ; it was complete communion of intellect :

‘ Beyond their utmost purple rim,
 And deep into the dying day,
The happy princess followed him.’

An onlooker would have observed that, as he repeated the lines of Tennyson, he turned his eyes on her ; while she was sitting entranced in her contemplation of the depths of blue above them. Helen’s was a spiritual, intangible happiness—his was material and concrete.

'I wish our day-dream could last for ever, like Lady Flora's.'

'How tired we should become of one another,' she said, with a smile, withdrawing her eyes from the distance to meet his.

'I would not mind trying.' Then suddenly he turned, and asked her to sing something.

Aided by a sudden divination, she chose the plaintive harmonies he had heard at Deringham, when they had first met :

'Comme un écho de l'absente chérie
Espoir salut, ineffable soutien,
Un doux refrain suffit ! Vous voyez bien—
Que la chanson c'est parfois la patrie !'

What key-note in his being was it that she touched ? As she sat there, her grey eyes grown darker with excitement, her slender white throat throbbing with the song she was pouring forth, he was thrilled with a thousand suggestions and possibilities. His being seemed to meet hers as she sang, and to form a perfect chord. All nationality was swept away. She was a fair young priestess, lighting the flame of

that intangible enthusiasm which knits the ties of kinship closer all over the world. A faint tinge of colour mounted to her cheeks, while her eyes looked dark with changing shadows of black and violet in their depths, as she chanted the simple words.

Maurice had told her a day or two before, laughing, that for a wonder he was beginning to find out the colour of her eyes, which until then had been a mystery to him, and that he had counted at least six different shades. His whole being vibrated with passionate rapture as he now gazed into their depths; and he turned away quickly when she had finished, to hide his agitation, while a sudden silence fell on both of them.

At last the sun sank towards the west, throwing bars of crimson and gold across the rippling water, and shining with its level beams into Maurice's and Helen's eyes as they sat talking with subdued voices, lulled into quietude by the beauty of the scene. Gradually all colour died out of the grey mist, through which

the lights of the steamers passing up and down shone with a lurid gleam. A cold wind came rustling in from the sea. They watched expectantly as it ruffled the crimson surface of the river in patches, overspreading at last the whole, and making the water ripple and sigh and swish and eddy round the little vessel, bulging out the sails, and tightening the slackened ropes. Helen shivered, and drew her white knitted shawl closer round her.

' You are cold,' he said quickly. ' What warmth can you get out of this flimsy thing? Let me fetch you a coat.'

' Thank you; I am not cold. But what o'clock is it? Isn't it time to turn back?'

' It is only seven, and we have arranged, Barnes and I,' nodding at the skipper, ' to put into Sheerness. We can get home just as well from there, and it would be useless attempting to make any headway against the tide with this light breeze. I have looked at the 'A. B. C.,' and find that trains run from there to London up to ten o'clock. The next one is at eight. So under

any circumstances we can have our dinner in peace and comfort, and then, if you like, either return by the eight o'clock or see the town of Sheerness by moonlight.'

'I must take the eight o'clock,' said Helen, in some trepidation. 'In fact, we ought to have gone earlier. My mother will be nervous.'

'I will order dinner at once then, and the boat in half an hour.'

'Did you ever have a "clairvoyance"—a foreboding that something was going to happen? I have one at this moment,' she murmured, in a low voice.

'I ought to, for they say second-sight is an inheritance of the Percevals.'

'Don't you feel anything to-night, then?' she repeated earnestly. 'I believe you do, for I saw your hand tremble.'

'I feel nothing but the most supreme happiness,' he said, leaning towards her, so that he touched her dress. 'You must not spoil our day, which has been all sunshine, by gloomy thoughts now.'

'I don't know what it is,' she went on,

laying her hand on her heart ; ‘it is something heavy here. But come, let us eat our dinner now ;’ and jumping up, Helen went down below.

Is the veil which curtains events sometimes withdrawn, and are ‘disclosures of the soul’ permitted to highly sensitive natures?

She was restless and nervous the whole of dinner, and kept continually glancing at the clock. At last she started up and said :

‘It is past the half-hour. We ought to be off.’

‘Is it?’ he answered, taking his watch out leisurely, and comparing it with the other. ‘Have you got all your belongings? I will tell my fellow to finish packing my bag, and be ready in a moment.’

It took, however, some moments for Sir Maurice’s ‘fellow’ to finish packing the bag. When they stepped into the boat, it was twenty minutes to the hour at which the train was timed to go.

‘We have plenty of time,’ said Sir Maurice calmly, seeing Helen was nervous.

‘The station is close to the landing-place.’

He set his teeth, however, as he pulled at the tiller-rope to keep the boat up against the current.

‘Look after your pretty dress, Countess de Ferrin. It will be spoilt by the sea-water if you don’t take care.’

‘Never mind my dress,’ was the petulant answer. ‘I hope we shall not be late. I see the train puffing already.’

‘Don’t be afraid. Put yourself in my hands. Damn this tide!’ he muttered immediately after, as the boat seemed to remain motionless before the swirl of the water as it came round the headland.

When they reached the landing-place, Helen did not wait a moment; and hardly touching the arm of the sailor which was held out to help her, jumped on shore, and began running towards the station. She soon became breathless, however, and had to stop, panting, while Sir Maurice came up. He offered her his arm, and they hastened forward as fast as her strength would

permit. Their eager hurry was unavailing, however. As they reached the railway platform, they could see the red lights of the train disappearing in the distance like two great demon's eyes.

Helen turned and gazed after them, a sick feeling of dread creeping over her heart. She had never missed a train in her life before, and this seemed like some avenging fate descending as a punishment for her thoughtlessness that day.

'Never mind; we can take the next one,' Maurice said hopefully. 'The ten o'clock goes from the same platform, I suppose?' he added, turning to the porter.

'Ten o'clock, sir? She's not been running for the last month.'

'It's down in the time-table.'

'Maybe. What I tell you is true.'

Maurice was silent for a second or two, scared himself for the first time.

'Can I have a special?'

'To London, sir? Haven't an engine or a carriage in the place. Ought to have told us in the morning.'

'What is the first train to-morrow morning?'

'To-morrow's Sunday. Ten o'clock.'

'When does it reach London?'

'She's a slow one, stopping at all the stations. Middle of the day.'

'Where's the stationmaster?'

'There he is; but he can tell you no more than I can,' and the man turned rudely away.

After a conversation with the stationmaster, Maurice began to realize the desperate position of affairs, and his first thought was to lead Helen to some quiet place, where they might discuss what was to be done.

She was almost fainting, and leaning heavily on his arm. When they got out, with nothing but the faint pearly moon and steadfast stars as onlookers, she fairly broke down, and sinking on a bench, covered her face with her hands, and, rocking herself backwards and forwards, moaned in her misery.

'What shall I do?—oh, what shall I do?'

Her want of self-control broke down all barriers between them.

'My darling, there is but one thing for you to do.'

'What will they say at home?'

'They cannot say worse than has already been said.'

'No; but my mother—my uncle!'

'Ah! yes, I forgot.' In his foreboding of what his own world would say, he had forgotten any other. 'But, Helen, sooner or later it was fated to be.'

'What was fated to be?' she asked, looking up with an ominous gleam in her eyes.

'You and I were fated to belong to one another.'

'You have got me into this trouble, and now intend to insult me, I conclude,' she said, rising. 'I think the sooner you and I separate the better.'

'You do not mean to leave me like this. Where will you go?'

'I suppose there are hotels in the place,' she said, with much dignity, her quiver-

ing voice, however, revealing the anguish that she felt ; for with no less a name can the intense humiliation of her position be expressed.

Up to this moment, she had challenged the opinion of society because she had felt their judgment to be unjust ; but now how could she ever hold up her head again, or face the world with the conviction of her innocence ? Her mother, too, the anxiety alone was enough to kill her ; and Margaret, whom she had thought to punish only for a time—how could she ever put this irrevocable wrong right in their eyes ? He ought not to have done it—he ought not to have done it.

Then, after a short time the generous side of Helen's character asserted its supremacy—she recalled to mind that, after all, the harm done to him was almost as great as the harm done to herself. What would Margaret, and his mother, and Laura think ? His future was ruined. Holding out her hand, she made an offer of forgiveness. He seized it.

‘ You are not angry with me, then? You forgive me?’

‘ The time has come, not for forgiveness, but to think of what we must do.’

‘ What we must do? Of course there is but one thing to do.’

‘ What is that?’

‘ To go back to the yacht.’

‘ You mean then to tell me, that because we have made one blunder, we had better retrieve it by making another.’

Helen’s temper was rising again, and he saw he must keep calm if he wished to gain his end.

‘ It is the only possible solution.’

‘ Are there no hotels in the place?’

‘ Listen to me. Helen, I implore you, listen! You have sacrificed our love once to an unreasoning idea of what was due to your honour and my happiness. Will you do it again? No, you cannot! You will not! Be mine! Come with me!’ And then, with all the brutality of his sex, though she prayed for mercy, he poured out the story of his passion, begging her to

listen to him. Forgetful of her defenceless position, of the trouble he had got her into, he went on with a determination that would have been ungentlemanly were it not sanctioned by tradition and precedent.

Small and slight as she was, there was something heroic in the pose of her head and figure as she stood there against the darkening evening sky, holding out her hand.

'Good-bye! I am going to the hotel, or to some hotel; for I don't know the names of any of them.'

'You will let me come with you. You will let me help you,' he said, moved to a sudden pity by the hollow-eyed, pale, drawn face before him.

What a contrast to the dainty figure he had taken on board that morning! The pretty blue dress was tossed and crumpled, the gauze bonnet-strings hung limp and partly untied; while the soft long gloves it was a trick of hers to pull up repeatedly, had slipped down in folds, showing the slight white wrists. All her usual care

and attention to appearances were forgotten now.

‘I am afraid your assistance would rather be a drawback than an advantage under the circumstances.’

Passionate as he was, Maurice had no strength or will to persist, and he was awed into submission by her expression.

‘But you cannot go alone.’

‘Ah, how dreadful it will be!’ she said, covering her face with her hands. ‘Fancy the waiters and the hotel people! What will they think? Will they take me in?’

‘I doubt it, unless I go with you. You must really let it be so. After all, the worst will not be said *here*.’

And subdued, and forced into union by the terrible forebodings of what would be said elsewhere, they went to find the best hotel in the place where she could obtain shelter for the night.



CHAPTER XII.

'And surely when all this is past,
They shall not want their rest at last.'

WHILE the principal actors in the drama I have to relate were thus torn and hurried along by the passions and interests of life, death, the inevitable, was in the midst of them.

After an interminable journey home by train, and a long jolt from the station through streets dull and lifeless in the decorum of their Sunday deportment, Helen was greeted at the door by the little servant-girl, looking red-eyed and flurried.

'What is the matter?' asked Helen, a sudden dread falling on her, and

making her feel more miserable than ever.

'Ah, it's madam! Madam is so ill!' And the girl, breaking down, put her apron to her eyes.

Helen did not want to hear more, but with a sharp cry, 'Mother!' she ran as quickly as she could up the stairs.

At the door of her mother's room she met her uncle, who with a stern, sorrowful expression, put up his hand to warn her back.

'What's the matter? What is it?'

'Death,' was all his answer.

'When? How?' she faltered, with white lips.

'I found her when I came home last night sitting rigid and stiff in her arm-chair. She was paralyzed! I took her in my arms, and carried her to bed; and there she lies now.'

'But why had you left her? Oh mother, mother! why did I ever go away?'

'She was fidgety and anxious about you as the evening came on,' Laurence con-

tinued, his voice quivering ; ‘and begged me to go to the station to await your arrival. When the last train came in, and I found you were not there, I returned to find what I tell you. I have done everything I could, but it is little mortal effort can avail. Dr. Musgrave has been here ; he says it is paralysis, and that there was nothing for it but to apply warm fomentations, and try to restore the circulation.’

‘Can I see her?’

‘Yes ; but you had better change that dress and bonnet. Should she regain any consciousness, it might shock her to see you like that.’

Helen’s brain, numbed and distraught as it was, realized the full import of these words.

‘She talked of you all day, and was miserable when you did not return.’

‘Do you think my absence had anything to do with it?’

‘God knows !’

Silence fell upon them ; he said nothing

further, knowing that the bitterest reproach lay in the facts he had already told her.

When my heroine entered her mother's room, she endured one of those moments which, in intensity of sensation, dwarf everything else to nothing in the life of the sufferer. There lay the rigid body of her she had left rational and conscious, stretched on the bed. The lid of the left eye had fallen, the hand hung down motionless, the eye still open had no sense or intelligence.

Helen cast herself on her knees by the bed, stroked the ice-cold face, raised the inert hand to her lips. It was of no avail! No loving gestures or words would ever wake her out of that leaden sleep! With a great sob rising in her throat Helen bowed her head, too much crushed even to seek aid at the only source open to her.

The miserable hours passed away, and at nightfall the doctor came again. He entered the room with that mysterious self-sufficient smile hovering about the corners of his mouth which all physicians keep, even in

the face of death. Holding out his soft doctorial hand to Helen, more as though to calm her than as a recognition of friendship, he passed on into the sick-room. A brief examination was all that was necessary, and then he turned to the watching figure, with pale face and trembling lips, that awaited his verdict.

‘She will rally from this, but the fear is another stroke. You look very ill yourself,’ he added abruptly. ‘Remember you will require all your strength now. You had better have a professional nurse—one of the sisters. I will send one in to-morrow;’ and after writing a prescription, with a hurried shake of the hand he went away.

Helen followed him a few steps, and then, seeing that he stopped to speak to her uncle, returned to her mother’s bedside. After a few moments had elapsed, however, she slipped into the sitting-room.

‘What did he tell you?’ she said, laying her hand on Laurence’s arm. ‘Is she dying? You must tell me. I cannot bear this suspense.’

She looked so pale and ill by the light of the flickering candle standing on the table, that her uncle was frightened.

‘He cannot say. Of course it is very critical, but there is hope.’

She sank into the armchair, folded her hands on her lap, and sat for some time looking straight before her. With her dark hair standing round her face, and the deep black rings round her eyes, she looked like a ghost rather than a creature of flesh and blood.

‘Do you think she will never recognise me again?’

‘If she rallies she will.’

‘God could not take her from me without that. Just once, that I might explain. My sin does not deserve so great a punishment.’

‘You shall explain all, my child,’ echoed Laurence monotonously and hopelessly. ‘Who are we that we should judge you? And she was the last to judge anyone.’

‘Do you think it killed her?’

‘What?’

‘My staying away.’

'I don't think so.'

Laying his hand on hers, he tried gently and wisely to assuage the vehemence of her self-reproach. The two voices went on late into the night, and she told him all.

Next morning a mild, gentle-eyed 'sister,' sent by the doctor, came to act as nurse; and not a moment too soon, for it was evident Helen was in no way equal to the exertion. Madame de Carrel seemed better, her breathing was easier, and she muttered a few broken sentences. Helen heard her whisper 'Raoul,' 'Hélène,' several times. Then she talked of Henry V., the king of spades, trumps, the odd trick, as if playing cards with Laurence. It was heart-breaking to the young woman, however, to see how changed she was—almost irrecongnisable now that the rouge was washed off her face, leaving the hollow cheeks, drawn mouth, and sunken eyes painfully visible.

When the doctor came he was better satisfied with the patient's condition, and said again that she might rally, but advised Helen not to put any very great

faith in the appearance of improvement. His measured words were sufficiently hopeful to relieve the extreme tension of the young woman's anxiety. She lay down, but was so restless and excited that she found it impossible to sleep, and getting up, wandered from room to room. The calm, tranquil eyes of the sister, who sat watching by the bedside, seemed to reprove her. She could not tell Laurence Ferrers what was on her mind, so she took one of her head-long, uncalculating resolutions. The base disloyalty of the last few weeks must be expunged from her life, ere she could face the night-watcher with her silent condemnation.

This determination was strong within her, but had not as yet taken definite shape; when, coming from her mother's room into the sitting-room, she saw standing on the table a basket full of beautiful exotic flowers, and a letter from Sir Maurice—written unconscious of the trouble that had fallen on the little circle—telling her that, not knowing soon enough that the day before was St. Helen's, her *séte*-day,

he had been unable to let her have a bouquet in time ; but would she accept now the offering sent ?

‘ I have not dared,’ he went on, ‘ to go and ask how you got home on Sunday ; but I implore you to tell me if I cannot call and ascertain in person.’

Helen bent over the basket for a moment, and then her thoughts flew back to the fresh, simple flowers he had sent her from Stourton. How different were these exotic blooms laid in cotton-wool !

Their scent made her feel dizzy ; a sudden horror seized her. His unconsciousness of her grief, the triviality of his sending flowers, seemed unreasonably to come like a shock upon her.

She seized them passionately, and flung them from her into the empty grate. One piece of heliotrope rested, however, in the folds of her skirt. Inconsistently, foolishly, she took it and pressed it to her lips, and then threw it also from her, as though with the sweetness of its perfume she had bidden farewell to the sweetest memories of her life.

Sir Maurice called that afternoon, and was not admitted. He then learnt for the first time the calamity that had befallen the woman he loved.

In the afternoon her mother had a relapse, and Helen sat up by her bedside all night, a leaden weight of dread upon her—for she knew it was the end. She cowered down before the mysterious, invisible presence which was in the room, and which she saw on her mother's face. A great awe came over her, and a feeling of the weakness of all bonds that tie us to worldly concerns. The circle of her sympathies and aspirations seemed suddenly widened; time and eternity were brought nearer. All else was dwarfed into nothingness in face of the immensity of death. As the first streaks appeared in the east, lighting up Helen's weary face, her soul 'took the wings of the morning,' and, mounting upwards, braced itself to a renunciation of which it would have been incapable amidst the absorbing egoism of earthly agitation and emotion.

One sunny July morning, ere the mani-

fold noises of busy human labour had awakened to disturb the calm, Madame de Carrel passed away, unconscious to the last. Her daughter and Laurence Ferrers were the only mourners that followed the coffin to the little cemetery in Brompton, where she herself had expressed a wish to be buried sometime before her death. Helen went through the ceremony without any outward sign of emotion. It was only when she returned to the house in Russell Place, and, mounting the narrow staircase, went into the empty bedroom, that she fully realized what she had lost. There lay the lace-trimmed pillows on the bed that still seemed to bear the impress of her mother's body ; there was the dainty embroidered handkerchief, as it had dropped from the hand rigid in death ; there were the bottles from which she had last taken the medicine, given even when all hope had vanished. Mechanically the sad-hearted mourner stroked the pillows, folded the crumpled handkerchief, and arranged the bottles, as though the invalid were still there to be tended ; and then, with

bent head, breathed a silent requiem over all the love and youth and hope that the mother she cherished so deeply had latterly represented in her existence.

As the evening came on, she lit a night-light, and sat down in the armchair, listening vacantly to a barrel-organ outside playing an air from the 'Trovatore,' and the cricket chirping down below. The music died away in the distance at last, and the cricket and the clock on the chimneypiece were the only sounds audible. She remained motionless, fancying she heard her mother's voice calling, and yet she could not go to her. There were leaden weights to her feet that held her back. Once she was certain she heard her breathing, and then the groan she gave before awakening. Her heart began to beat wildly ; a mist rose before her eyes, and a numb unconsciousness that was not sleep came over her senses, from which she did not recover until the morning.

Laurence was shocked when he saw her next day. But he did not dare say anything,

as she had so much to do getting her mourning, attending to her mother's testamentary instructions, and seeing the priest of the parish about the masses to be said. He comforted himself with the thought that perhaps any physical fatigue was better than mental torpor.

On a small piece of parchment in Madame de Carrel's jewel-box, they found a will made shortly before her death :

'To my dear brother, Laurence Ferrers, I leave the miniature of Charles I. set in pearls, which will be found in this box ; and the pastel likeness of Henri V. that hangs above my bed. Also I bequeath to him my book of prayers, hoping it may bring him to a better understanding of the divine doctrines than he has at present.' An enamel heart encrusted in diamonds she requested might be given to the shrine of the 'Sacré Cœur' in the Rue des Fossés Saint Antoine, in Paris ; a gold brooch to the landlady of the house, and a small locket to the servant-girl who had waited on her. 'All the rest of my property and

jewellery I leave to my dear daughter Helen, to be disposed of by her as she shall see fit, only stipulating that she must pay the Oratory a sufficient sum for ten masses to be said for my soul.'

'Poor mother!' thought the young woman as she pressed the crumpled piece of parchment to her lips; 'she had not large earthly possessions, but she has given me as heirloom the tenderest memory a parent ever left a child.' And folding it up reverently, she laid it back again beneath the tray of the jewel-box, where she had found it.

All her professional engagements had been given up, from the day her mother was taken ill, and one of the things that touched her most was Horace Crofts's kindness. Not a day passed that he did not call to see what he could do for her; and he saved her all trouble in applying for the money still owing in various quarters. She smiled sadly when she received his letter enclosing a cheque: what use was it to her now that there was no one to care for, no one to work for?



CHAPTER XIII.

SOME days after her mother's death, Helen was standing one evening in the darkness of the little room, leaning her head against the sash of the window, and looking out at the gas-lit street. The starry heavens stretched clear and tranquil above, but she was too sad and too weary to lift her eyes from the noisy smoky city. On the table behind her stood an old-fashioned inlaid wooden desk, with sloping velvet-covered front; a half-open paper containing a lock of hair and a bundle of letters discoloured with age lay upon it. Helen had got into the way of thus remaining in the darkness, and the servant-girl, mindful of her fancy, left her

undisturbed. Presently the door opened, and Laurence Ferrers appeared. She turned and smiled ; both remained silent for a moment, while he came and stood beside her. Instead of looking down at the street, however, he lifted his face upwards.

‘What are you thinking of?’ she at length asked dreamily.

‘I was thinking that nothing gives such an idea of peace as a clear cloudless sky stretching above a city. One knows that life, with all its sorrow and its cares, is going on beneath ; but there rests the sky, unmoved, untarnished. What are our sufferings and disappointments in the face of that?’

‘I am afraid I have not reached so elevated a stage of philosophy. I cannot see beyond the chimney-pots.’

‘You will in time, my child.’

‘The time seems to me long in coming. Uncle,’ she added suddenly, retiring a pace or two from the window, so that the moon-

light might not reveal the emotion on her face. ‘I want you to do something for me.’

‘What is it?’

‘I want you to find out where the Percevals are—if Margaret, I mean, is with Sir Maurice, or—you know.’

‘I know, and can tell you exactly. It is the last scandal in society, and talked about in all the clubs. The consequences of that escapade of yours down the river have indeed been disastrous. She has left him, and both he and she declare that nothing will ever induce them to meet again. Indeed, at one time the *on dit* was that a divorce was imminent. She was silent for a moment, and then said :

‘Has Sir Maurice been here lately?’

‘Yes; every day.’

‘Next time he comes will you see him for me, and tell him it is no use his calling, for I have made up my mind never to have another interview with him?’

Laurence Ferrers did not answer for a

moment. He had so long been excluded from personal agitations, and from the necessity of acting on his own account, that, with a philosophic selfishness, he had a peculiar objection to moving in other people's affairs. When his sister died he had accepted the blow with gentle resignation; but of his own initiative had done nothing in the final arrangements, leaving everything to Helen. He now was most anxious to be of assistance to his niece; but could not help feeling, without acknowledging to himself how far the wish was father to the thought, that she would do it so much better herself. He understood the whole situation—he had often in an indefinite way understood it before. He knew by Helen's whole bearing that the tragedy of her life was being enacted; but he repeated to himself in his epicurean view of life, 'I can do nothing—the mischief was effected before I was able to avert it. She must learn to live it down like other people.'

'Would it not be better to write to

him? I think such things are always most conclusively done by letters,' avoiding the direct glance of her eyes.

'I don't think so. But of course, if you will not do it, I can see him myself,' she said, a little irritably.

He was immediately constrained by her tone to a show of willingness.

'I will do anything to save you pain.'

'It would save me a great deal of pain.'

Her voice quivered, and she held her hands tightly pressed together in her lap as she spoke.

'What am I to say to him?' he asked gently.

'You are to tell him that I cannot see him again. Ask him when he is going to Canada—and—and beg him from me to bid good-bye to his wife before he goes. Will you do this, uncle?' Her voice ended in a sob as she spoke. After a moment's pause, she went on: 'You must say, also, that he must not write to me. I will not read his letters if he does.'

‘ I will do it all for you to-morrow.’

The gas-lamps flickered outside; a cab rolled along and died away in the distance; the footsteps of several passers-by broke the stillness ; and then she added softly : ‘ Forgive me. I must go and try to rest now, I am so tired.’

‘ I will do what you ask, to-morrow,’ he said, feeling the necessity of keeping up his resolution by determined repetition.

‘ Thank you.’ And unable to say more, she left him.

She was sitting waiting in the same place when Laurence appeared next evening. The old man seemed worn and worried with the strife of young lives going on round him.

‘ I saw him. I told all you said, my child ; but the only answer he made was, that you had no right to ask it. He wrote these few lines in pencil at my table, and begged me to give them to you. He leaves for Canada in the *Quebec*, the week after next, as soon as Parliament is up.’

‘Does he?’

‘Don’t you think, perhaps, if you granted him an interview, you might do something to heal up this wretched breach between husband and wife?’

‘Hardly, I think.’

‘You know best. I have the greatest confidence in your judgment.’

Helen thought a good deal over what her uncle had said, first of all thinking she would take one course of action, then another. Her hesitation and doubt were resolved for her.

In any perplexity in the old days, she had always resorted to the aid of prayer. Trouble and sadness had for some days stood between her and the altar, forbidding the fusion of her own personality in the Divine peace.

The morning after reading Maurice’s petition—in her helplessness, in her necessity for some advice, some guide—she made up her mind to seek the neglected assistance of her religion.

At the entrance to Russell Place, return-
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ing home, she met Maurice face to face. Not a word was at first spoken between them. He turned to accompany her, and after a few seconds, said quietly :

‘ I have waited to see you.’

‘ What have you to say?’

‘ When we reach home I will tell you.’

‘ Home!’ the word struck upon her ear—and yet was not that dingy, shabby house the home of their dearest, happiest memories?

As soon as they entered the little sitting-room she dropped wearily into a chair that stood with its back to the light, so that he could not even see her face. Then, twirling the ring on the finger of her left hand that lay in her lap, she began in a low monotonous voice :

‘ I am glad you waited ; I have something to say to you.’

He bowed his head, and she added :

‘ Since last we met I see things in a clearer light than before. You and I must not meet again ! and you must go back to Margaret.’

‘ What?’

'We had been drifting on,' she continued quietly, as if he had not spoken; 'not seeing where we were going, until that last terrible day. But now I have made up my mind—you must go back to Margaret.'

'Go back now! the thing is impossible!
Face that life again! I cannot!

The soft voice went on: 'The threads that were interwoven through our lives in the past are absolutely dropped. New ones will have to be taken up. Friendship even cannot exist at present between you and me. Perhaps, sometime in the future, we may meet again. Now, our first duty is to separate.'

He turned and looked at her for one second, and a flame shot from his eyes that frightened her. All that was worst in him was roused.

Unmindful of her sorrow, unmindful of the presence almost of death in the house, carried away by the violence of his passion, he heaped words of reproach upon her.

Helen rose, and resting against the

chimney-piece, cowered beneath his scathing words as a wayfarer caught in a storm cowers down, seeking shelter from the pelt-ing drops.

‘How can you say such cruel things?’ she gasped once; but he continued, telling her how she had ruined his life, played with his love, led him on to satisfy her own vanity, and then thrown him over on the plea of duty.

At last indignation mastered all other considerations, and panting for breath, she said: ‘I will listen to you no longer! Go!’

Her look sobered him in an instant.

‘Forgive me—— I did not mean it! But you are ruining my life, and I must tell you how I suffer. Why do you say we are not to meet again?’

‘Because I know it. I speak for myself if not for you—— I ought to send you away. I ought never to speak to you again, for what you have just said; but I am only a woman, only a weak miserable woman. I love you! and for the sake of that love I have done wrong. You must

help me to prevent that wrong becoming irreparable.'

'How can it be otherwise? See what my life is! My mother is now completely turned against me.'

'Ever since—'

'Yes, ever since that wretched yachting business. Margaret, who had come back, returned again to Stourton a day or two after, and I have held no communication with any of them.'

'Our friendship was indeed a wild dream. It has been rudely dissipated. You will promise me to see Margaret?'

'I cannot! You forget I am going away!'

'I don't forget anything; but you must see her before you leave. I do not want you to put off your departure; I think it best for all parties you should go; but you ought to bid her good-bye.'

'It would only lead to a wider separation. Besides, I dare not face my mother. Margaret may tell her what she likes, and may give any reason she thinks fit for my

sudden resolution to go to Canada. I will write myself, and tell her I have accepted the appointment because I want some shooting and fishing ; but I dare not see her.'

' What day do you leave, and how long are you likely to be away ?'

' I don't know ; my movements depend on my superiors. I have been given a staff appointment, and will remain, I think, until next spring.'

' Next spring, stopping over the winter ? In that climate ?'

' Climate ! — what does that matter ? Here there are arctic regions for me, where the very breath is frozen on my lips !' As he spoke, he walked passionately up and down. ' Better die out there in the service of my country, than die here of the slow torture you wish to condemn me to.' At last he stopped suddenly, facing her : ' Will you do something for me ?'

' Yes, whatever I can.'

' Will you give me some memory of you to take with me ?'

‘I do not know of anything.’

‘I will tell you, then, something I would give a great deal to possess. When I first met you—you remember, at Deringham?—you had an amber necklace on; hanging to it was a clear amber heart, like a flame. Will you give me that? I will give it back again some day. Don’t trouble; another time will do,’ he added, putting out his hand as he saw her rise.

‘I would rather give it now.’ And she walked slowly to the door, looking tall and slight in her long black gown.

When she came back, the faint evening sun that had lighted the room through the mist had gone down behind the roofs of the houses opposite. He was standing almost invisible in the dark. Holding out the token to him, she said softly: ‘You will do what I ask?’

He kept her hand a moment.

‘I should have to tell her I love her. How can I perjure my soul?’

‘I cannot urge you if you will not; but it is my last request.’

‘Not your last; I shall see you again.’

She made no answer, and he went on:

‘When I come back from Canada, perhaps there will be a chance of a better understanding between—between my wife and me; but don’t let us talk of it now. Do you forgive me what I said just now?’

‘I forgive you.’

He took the amber heart, raised the hand that held it to his lips, and hurried from the room.

She stood giddy and bewildered, holding her hands on either side of her head, as if to still the throbbing of her brain. She longed to cry, ‘Come back—come back!’ She longed to hear him whisper words of love as in the old days; but it was not to be. And surely, inevitably, she knew, though he did not, that they should never meet again—it was farewell for ever!



CHAPTER XIV.

NON matters of sentiment between men and women, ‘the door,’ we are told, ‘must always either be open or shut.’ Helen, like all quick-feeling, emotional people, closed it between herself and Maurice for ever. Now, however, that the impetus that had carried her along was over, and her resolution accomplished, she sank back weary and dejected. Alas! those miserable days that all of us have gone through some time or other in our way through life—days when we say to ourselves, ‘How much more easy it would be to die than to live!’—days of monotonous, continuous, ever-present sorrow, when we go to bed tired and rise in the morning unrested.

Those are the days that drain away our life-blood, and undermine the vigour even of the strongest.

‘In the midst of life we are in death’ has a more immediate signification than the preacher imagined ; for there is a stagnant dreariness, a death in life that comes over the soul, rendering it virtually dead to all but its desolation and the loss of those it loves.

She had often faced this loneliness in thought during her mother’s illness ; but it had never come upon her so entirely before. She did not feel the heat of the hours that oppressed everyone else ; she did not know if the sun shone, or if the air were dim and cheerless : it was the same to her. She felt her strength going, day by day, hour by hour, with fatal certainty ; but made no effort to struggle against the languor that was slowly sapping her powers. All energy was absorbed in her grief, with a concentration that would have been selfish had she had anything to live for, any incentive to be otherwise. She went out walking as a

duty every day, but any extra exertion brought on palpitation of the heart and sleeplessness at night.

Laurence Ferrers at last became anxious, as he saw the hollow, worn look about the temples becoming more apparent, the deep line between the eyebrows more marked, and the dark circle round the eyes, that showed her frequent secret tears, becoming darker. Everything she had gone through in the later months was written on her face—the joy, the love, the regret.

‘ You must see a doctor, Helen,’ he said to her one evening, when, as usual, he brought up her cup of chocolate, brown and frothing, trying to tempt her to take something. ‘ You are getting paler and paler, and thinner and thinner every day. You must not be so listless. You will be seriously ill.’

‘ I am seriously ill, and of the most hopeless disease. I have no wish to live.’

‘ It’s not right for any human being to drift into that state of mind—you who have your art, your friends.’

‘Who are they, uncle? You and perhaps the little servant-girl are the only people who care now whether I am alive or dead.’

Her voice had latterly taken that tone that Heinrich Heine tells us is peculiar to a crystal bell broken invisibly. The injury can only be guessed by the mysteriously sad vibration it gives forth. In a woman’s voice it means the loss of all hope and joy.

‘How about your friends the Byers’? Why have you so entirely dissociated your life from theirs, Helen?’

‘It is they who have withdrawn from me, not I from them. A black veil seems to have fallen between the old life at Stourton and this. My visits there used to be the brightest, sunniest portion of the year. Now it all seems changed. I think it is so generally. Friends form other ties, and one seems to drop out of their existence, as they do out of one’s own. And yet I ought not to say that; for I had a letter not long ago from Mr. Byers, asking if you and I would not go

down and stop with them for a week. I did not dare tell you, for I knew you would persuade me to accept, and I should hate it so!' she said with a shiver. ' Having been shut up for so long, I dread meeting people, and having to live in contact with my neighbours, and as they do.'

' You are not well. You are becoming morbid, misanthropical ; and that is not your real nature. You ought to struggle against it.'

' Why should I struggle ? Who cares now except you ? And I know you are long-suffering, and will bear it. I really do try sometimes to make an effort to cast off the vague listlessness that hangs upon me ; but what can I do ? I have no physical strength. I would give worlds for once to sleep the sleep of two years ago—the sleep of youth and health ; for then I had both. Now I have nothing but old age and feebleness left. Ah ! the nights that I lie awake, hearing every hour strike, with my pulses throbbing, my head aching, until the morning breaks blank and cheer-

less! The hours pass for me now without a division between the days.'

' You only want exercise in the open air and change of scene. No grief can withstand bodily fatigue.'

' I beg your pardon,' she answered, as if studying her own case impartially. ' There are states of mind when the moth and rust of *désillusionment* and disappointment eat into the soul, and render the body incapable of coping with it. And then you tell me everyone is equally happy.'

' My dear child,' he said, trying to beg the question and take refuge in generalities, ' compensation comes in this life from our own natures and qualities, not from exterior benefits.'

' Don't be didactic, please. There is no kind of compensation for me, and you know it. Look at me as I was even a year ago, and look at me now. Then I had some one to live for—I had my art, an object in life. Now what have I ?'

' You have still your appreciation for beautiful things—that aspiration towards

things outside your daily life, love of the great and true. These are all compensations.'

'Stuff! They are no compensations for delicate health and a heavy heart. Besides, how can I use my mind or my appreciation? If I endeavour to read, the page turns black before my eyes, and I am perfectly incapable of studying a part. My brain is a blank in its present condition.'

'It will return to you; and believe me,' he went on, 'the true artist is not the man or woman who feels, but the man or woman who has felt. The really true interpreters of passion or emotion are those who have been through it and reached the other side. The best part of your professional career is yet to come. You must go away abroad and travel. Go to Italy or to France. I myself don't think there is any place like Rome or Naples to "cure the mind diseased." Live there some months, impregnate your soul with the peace and stillness that reigns amongst her temples and her treasure-houses

of painting and sculpture, and I will wager my reputation as a wise man and a philosopher that you come back cured in body and soul. Things in that serene atmosphere assume their just proportions. We see the extreme smallness of our own interests and sufferings, and we learn the insignificance of our own imbecile personalities.

‘I can’t, uncle. It is very well to talk. I have not the energy. I could never face a voyage abroad alone.’

‘I will go with you. It has been my dream to go back there again. To leave this rushing, money-burdened English life, and to wander among the ilex groves of the Villa Medici, or sit under the shadow of St. Peter’s; with you, too, who have never seen it, and who would appreciate it so thoroughly. Let us go. The doctor has ordered it.’

‘Doctors will order anything. How can the South do me any good? I have nothing the matter with my lungs.’

‘If it did you no good, it could

not do you any harm. What you want is rest.'

'The only place I really can get rest, is at the Convent of the Sisters at Villarette. You remember it, uncle? I often think I should like to fly off there.'

'No, no; Italy is the place for you. I will see to all the arrangements; you need not trouble about anything. How soon do you think we could start?'

'You are wonderfully impetuous all of a sudden, uncle. I must have more time to think it over. It is to me so great a wrench to think of leaving this little hole of a place, where I have been so happy and so miserable.' She looked round the room. It certainly looked gloomy and sordid enough to make her wish to fly anywhere to escape from it. 'Yet, wretched as it looks, it is connected with too many associations in my life for me to wish to leave it.'

'I can quite understand that, but it has been decided for you. Your own health, indeed, renders a continuance of your life

here impossible ; and we must give this place up before we go, for we could not afford to keep it on, as well as apartments in Rome. Let me see. I must go into expenses of the whole thing. Have you a foreign Bradshaw here ? he asked, taking a pencil and paper. ‘ No, of course not. What woman ever had anything practical and useful ? I must go down to my den and fetch one.’

When he returned, Bradshaw in hand, Helen was sitting in the same position in which he had left her.

‘ Have you seen the evening papers yet, uncle ?’

‘ No. Shall we send out and get one ? What a newspaper reader you have become ! I never remember seeing you devour them as you do now.’

‘ No, I don’t suppose you ever did.’ And as she spoke she got up and rang the bell, and asked the little maid to get her a *Globe* or a *Standard*.

It was only when the paper was brought in and handed to her, and Laurence saw

the expression of face with which she looked it over, that he understood.

‘What a comfort it is to think that we can have the luxury of English newspapers everywhere now on the Continent a day or two after their appearance in England,’ he said.

‘Can you?’ she asked, putting the paper aside.

‘Yes. They are always to be got at Piale’s three days after publication.’

Nothing more was said, and he went on with his calculations.

When he left her half an hour later, he knew his point was gained, and he saw his way clearly before him.

If Laurence Ferrers had worked all his life as he did for the few weeks after his conversation with Helen, he would have been a richer and more famous man than he had the privilege of calling himself. His efforts were fully crowned with success; for ere the dull mists of autumn had clouded the summer sky in England, he and she were rushing through the regions of *café*

au lait and *chemins de fer*, and reached the realization of his dream by at last entering the land of ‘macaroni’ and ‘Strade Ferrate.’

The rapture of the fresh air, the blue heavens, the wind rustling through the leaves, had at first the desired effect ; and Helen began to think, like a great many wiser philosophers, that the beauties of nature were enough to fill a woman’s life, and make it complete. And yet, what was this all-pervading presence? What was this voice that underlay the song of birds and the rustle of the trees? As she lay back and closed her eyes, she knew *that* presence was his, *that* voice was his. She might renounce the happiness, but the memory and the longing for it would last for ever. Meantime the young artist studied Italian enthusiastically, and learnt to recite ‘Paolo and Francesca’ in the original. She took singing lessons, found her voice stronger, and began at last to hope she had found the compensation her uncle talked of.

Every morning the first thing they did was to walk down the steps of the Piazza di Spagna (they had rooms in the Via Sistina), and find their way to Piale's. Laurence always looked forward with dread to these expeditions, Helen became so breathless, and her eyes looked so feverish and restless. When it was over, however, she was calmer, and would place herself at his disposal, to go where he liked. She took to writing continually to Stourton, too, he observed. She showed him the answers she received, which were chatty and amusing, from Mrs. Clark, gentle and affectionate from Miss Mary Byers ; but none of them calculated to satisfy the hungry craving of her heart.

'Lady Perceval and her daughter-in-law called here to-day,' Mrs. Clark wrote in one letter. 'People had talked a great deal after Sir Maurice's departure for Canada, but both ladies looked so calm and happy that the gossips had at last found nothing to say. Dr. Clark had been attending Margaret, who had not been very well, but was quite strong again now.' 'A letter was received

from Canada from Sir Maurice Perceval,' she wrote another time ; 'the Dowager showed it to me. Twenty degrees below zero, my dear, is the temperature in which he lives ; it makes me freeze to think of it.'

It made Helen's heart freeze as she read it ; but she said nothing as she handed it to Laurence Ferrers.

In the beginning of the new year they arranged a trip to Naples. Laurence himself had never been there ; so they both were equally anxious to see it. It was a lovely afternoon in the middle of January. The youthful year was, it seemed, endeavouring in every way to surpass its predecessor. The sea like glass had reflected a sapphire sky on its unruffled depths all day. Laurence Ferrers and Helen having gone by land to Amalfi, and paid their devotions at the shrine of Paestum, were now returning by boat to Sorrento. The latter, tired with the day's exertions, was indolently lying back in the boat, dipping the points of her slender fingers

in the water, listening to the boatmen's songs as they rowed in and out of the emerald-green caves where the mermaids and sirens lived, and watching the stars as they came out, one by one, in the darkling sky. Suddenly she shivered and complained of cold. Laurence put a shawl round her.

'In spite of the sunshine I have felt cold all day; haven't you?'

'No, I can't say I have; but you don't take care of yourself. I know this Italian climate better than you. You ought never to be without wraps. I saw you, for instance, sitting on one of those cold marble pillars to-day. I am certain it is not prudent.'

'What a Job's comforter you are, uncle!'

'I speak from bitter experience. I caught an ague in Rome from resting in the shade, when I was hot one day, on the Campagna, I shall never get rid of.'

By the time they reached the hôtel at Sorrento, where they were stopping, Helen's

teeth were chattering, and she seemed chilled to the bone. Laurence was right ; the treacherous climate had revenged itself for her imprudence. Next day she complained of headache and pains in her limbs, and the day after she was in a high fever.

For two weeks did she lie, sometimes delirious, sometimes comatose. Her uncle was in despair.

‘Why did I ever urge her to come away?’ he said, laying her illness at his own door. ‘I ought not to have done it ; she was not strong enough, and I ought to have taken better care of her. She is right—there seems to be an unhappy fate hanging over her.’

Before the fourteenth day she seemed to rally ; and was able to bear being lifted to the sofa by the window, that looked over the wonderful sunlit bay, with Naples glittering on one side and Capri on the other, while, close at hand, the orange-groves filled the air with perfume.

‘Uncle,’ she said, as she lay breathless from the exertion, ‘I want to go home; I want to go back to England.’

‘Yes, my child; we will go back as soon as you can be moved.’

‘I want to go back to Stourton. I feel that the rest of my work lies in Stourton.’

‘Yes,’ he said, half interrogatively, half assenting.

‘We need not trouble any of our friends there. We can take a place for ourselves.’

He thought it was only an invalid’s fancy at first; but she was so persistent about it, and returned so often to the subject, that at last, to satisfy her, he took pen and paper, and wrote to Mrs. Clark. Helen seemed happier when this was done, and dropped off into a refreshing sleep, from which she woke strengthened and revived.



CHAPTER XV.

IT was a cold morning towards the end of January. Mrs. Clark and her husband were sitting at breakfast in Wellesley House, when the early letters were brought in. Dr. Clark had evidently none that were particularly interesting ; for, after having opened and read them, he crumpled the lot in his hand, drew his chair to the fire, and, throwing them on the flame, poked them vigorously down, as if glad to see the last of an uninteresting budget. Hearing an exclamation from his wife, however, he turned, poker in hand, and asked : ‘What is it, Amelia?’

‘A letter from Laurence Ferrers. Poor little thing ! I am so sorry !’

‘ Who do you mean ? Ferrers ? And why all this expenditure of pity ? ’

‘ No, no—not Ferrers ; I do not take the least interest in his affairs,’ and Amelia continued reading, spectacles on nose, as she spoke.

‘ I knew your interest in that direction was not very acute ; that is why I asked.’

‘ Listen ; I will read you the end of the letter.

“ My niece has been very ill, and at one time I hardly thought she would get over it, especially as the doctors said there was a complication of the lungs. She is better now, but miserably weak. You will wonder why I write to you ; it is to ask a favour. With the curious fancifulness of an invalid, she has taken it into her head that, as soon as she can be moved, she will travel straight back to Stourton. No amount of persuasion on my part will turn her from it. As we do not want to inconvenience our friends, I should be so much obliged if

you would engage us rooms at the inn in the village. If I remember rightly, it was a quiet, comfortable old place, where an invalid could get plain, good food. Forgive me, please, for troubling you, but I do not know who to turn to but you in this dilemma. Hoping that Dr. Clark and all our Stourton friends are well,

“ Believe me, truly yours,

“ LAURENCE FERRERS.

“ If you write within the next week we shall still be here, as for some days I do not see any probability of the invalid being moved.”

‘ There’s a business ! ’ said Amelia, laying down the letter. ‘ Of course, they must not go to the inn—I never heard of such a thing ! It is like that old goose Ferrers to suggest it ! On the other hand, it would be out of the question their coming here. With your professional duties, we could not give an invalid the requisite quiet and attention. No ; I know what I can do.

I will go up to Mary this morning, and make arrangements for them to go to Maplewood ; and then I can write in time to catch the afternoon post If people will go poking into these unhealthy Catholic churches, they must expect what they get ; I never knew any good come of Catholicism. Do you remember those people who lived here—what was their name ? They went to Rome, and were perverted.'

'Converted,' put in Dr. Clark correctively.

'The son, I remember, ran away with the housemaid ; and the eldest girl—why, yes, she married that young engineer.'

'I had forgotten the circumstance,' said Dr. Clark, smiling, while he scratched his head.

'But isn't it curious, Clark, how deaths follow one another so often in the same family ?' Miss Amelia took off her spectacles and wiped them. 'What a foolish old woman I am growing !'

‘My dear Amelia, don’t jump so hastily to conclusions. She is not dead yet.’

‘To think it is not two years yet since she was first here! What changes have taken place! Of course, poor young thing! she was too fond of admiration, and play-acting, and all that sort of thing; but I don’t think there really was any harm in her. However, we must do all we can for her now; and you know how strict I am in my views.’

‘Yes, dear, I do,’ said the doctor, with a sigh.

‘I certainly did not think it right the way she went on with Sir Maurice; and I wish she had not taken to performing in public. I doubt if Mrs. Brotherton would care to call on her.’

‘Who cares! I never could make out the hullabaloo you people raised upon the subject of this poor creature; she always seemed to me perfectly harmless, and very pretty and agreeable.’

‘Well, there were a great many stories from London—not that I believe those

horrible papers—but her name was mixed up with that of Sir Maurice, especially after that trip she went down the river ; and I am certain she is the cause of his continued absence. Of course Margaret and he ought never to have married ; it is not every woman who can make a man of superior intellect happy.' And Amelia smoothed down the front of her dress with a self-sufficient air.

'I have no patience with these good looking young fellows,' ejaculated the doctor fiercely, 'who go about making all the women fall in love with them, and then go away, leaving things upside down. But now I must be off, or I will never get through my rounds to-day.' The doctor rose as he spoke, shook himself like a great bear, and going out, prepared to get himself into his greatcoat. He always wore a circular cape, like the Duke of Wellington, and the inhabitants of Stourton declared he turned his old railway-rugs to make them. 'But now see, Amelia, and do what you can for that poor little woman in

Italy ; I am certain she is not to blame in this business. I have to go to the Court, among other places ; Lady Perceval is not at all well. What a funny world it is ! bless me if I don't think it gets odder every day !' With a snort and a stamp the doctor left on his rounds.

As Amelia walked back after seeing her husband off, she crumpled the letter she held in her hand, and a soft smile came over her face, the reflection of her own happiness.

Wellesley House had a certain belligerent look about it, with its iron railings on the top, its iron-surrounded balconies, and its moss-grown, noseless, armless marble warrior, who stood in the centre of the grass-plot, defying creation. It certainly did not present the appearance of one of those bowers of bliss sung by the poets ; but it does not need perfect architectural proportions nor artistic decorations, nor even white lilies in blue and yellow jars, to make the abode of perfect love.

The house resembled Amelia herself, who, under a martial air, hid a soft heart. She

seemed, indeed, to have contracted a warlike appearance since coming to live amidst the memories of ‘The Duke.’ On entering her new state of life, the first article of luxury in which she had invested had been a wig—a fair wig of lavish redundancy. Mary Byers could tell you in confidence the undertaking the buying of that wig was. ‘And really, considering how little hair Edward has himself, I think it was an unnecessary expense,’ the gentle lady would add. Dr. Clark chivalrously pretended not to see the renovation in his wife’s appearance when she first put it on, and had kept up this kindly deception ever since. Ah! you beautiful women who command everything that charm and fascination can give, don’t turn your plainer sisters into ridicule, who are content to merge their identity in the one love of their life—content with the reward of an honest, upright, unvarying affection. Had you been capable of inspiring and reciprocating the same, your souls would be less contracted and your hearts less empty when you enter on the cheerless path of old age.

After the visit she paid to Maplewood Lodge that morning, Amelia wrote to Mr. Ferrers offering her brother and sister's hospitality. On receipt of his answer back accepting the invitation, a perfect saturnalia of house-cleaning began, under the auspices of the energetic lady who, although married, still remained, in a certain fashion, mistress of her brother's house. Anne creaked and perspired until she was out of breath and quite out of commas.

'Ye see *miss*' (as she always insisted on calling Mrs. Clark) 'this house has not been worth looking after since ye went. Why there Miss Mary actilly goes and buys this bed the other day.' Anne, who was shaking the article in question, lifted it up with contempt. 'Nothing but cocks and hens had the making of this. And de ye know what she said to me quite innocent like when I told her? "Well" she says 'and who ought to have had the making of it?" "Gecse of course" says I. If ye'd believe me she had never known it.

After Miss Byers's marriage, Anne had

also entered into the blissful state. There had been 'somebody'—for he hardly took a material form, the propriety of the Maplewood Lodge establishment not allowing of followers—who had aspired to the fair maiden's hand for years; and in a fit of desperation, being unable, as she said, 'to amalgamate with Mr. John,' now that Miss Byers had gone, she cast herself into the arms open to receive her, and departed. Needless to say, the household became hopelessly disorganized without the supervision of either Amelia or her 'aide-de-camp.'

Mary Byers rushed recklessly, as we have seen, into feather-beds produced by cocks and hens instead of geese, and various other enormities, until at last she was obliged to solicit Anne's return as the conqueror at any price. The terms exacted were heavy, being nothing less than the presence of Jack, her husband, in the house. It was a terrible sacrifice of etiquette; but Mary bravely made it, and ignored Jack's presence for some months, until by degrees he

asserted his position, and became a valuable addition to the establishment.

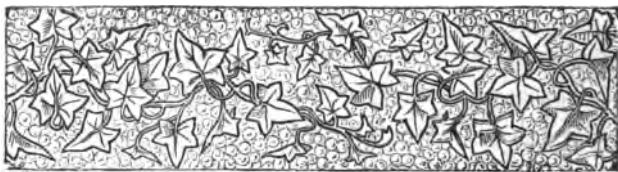
All rejoiced at the idea of getting Helen back again. Anne had always liked her for her soft, courteous manner. ‘She has a way of saying “Good-morning” that warms you up for the day,’ she said on one occasion ; and Anne’s liking was no empty form, for her heart was as warm as the heart of the most grammatical of women. Mr. Byers was glad, for he had never swerved in his friendship or his loyalty to his young friend. Miss Mary Byers was glad of a companion to listen to her soft, bird-like twitterings ; but the most touched and affected of the party seemed Mrs. Clark. There was a strange softness in her eyes and agitation in her movements as she walked round the spare room for the last time to see everything tidy and in place, that even her sister could not help remarking ; what upset all innocent Mary’s calculations, however, was the suggestion she made before she left.

‘Don’t you think, John,’ she said, turn-

ing to her brother, ‘you had better stop the gong while she is here ? It makes such a noise it might make her head ache.’

This offering up of all preconceived prejudice and conviction on the shrine of atonement was almost sublime.





CHAPTER XVI.

‘Hélas ! Hélas que les choses passent
Et les souvenirs démeurent.’

THE events of life are uncalculated and incalculable. On it goes headlong, while we are chasing some passion, some resentment, some individual concern. Helen did not arrive at Stourton until some weeks after she was expected, having had a relapse at Marseilles coming home ; and for some days after her arrival at Stourton she was so weak and ill that the purpose for which she had come remained perforce unaccomplished. To her astonishment, however, Margaret Perceval forestalled her by appearing one day in the Maplewood drawing-room. Helen was lying on the sofa, and her thoughts were wander-

ing back to that May-time she had spent there, when she had come down from London weary and fatigued, and had plunged into that golden dream which had destroyed her life.

The room seemed so haunted with memories that she lay with closed eyes to shut them out, when Margaret's sudden entrance startled her into a painful realization of the actual facts of life.

'Margaret?'

'Helen.'

And the two women, united by a common bond if by nothing else, forgot all animosities, and clasped hands.

Margaret had not been induced to come by any deep sentiment for Helen; the one deep sentiment she had was love for her husband. On further consideration she had regretted her hasty jealousy of the young Frenchwoman. Florence Gordon had been staying at Deringham, and had cleared up the suspicions in Margaret's mind on one or two subjects; and old Lady Perceval had told her various things concerning Laura

Bellisle which rather shook her faith in her as a credible witness. Like the cock on Stourton steeple, therefore, Margaret was inclined to turn round in the direction from whence the wind blew ; and that was decidedly in favour of Helen, and in favour of Helen acting as mediator between her and Maurice.

Of this course of reasoning Lady Perceval knew nothing ; she was not in the way of hearing London scandal, and only inferred there had been a deadlock of some kind between her son and his wife. Having a shrewd suspicion that Helen had conferred a great favour on the house of Perceval by refusing her son, she was inclined to put faith in her judgment and good sense, and was pleased when Margaret told her she was going to Maplewood to call on the Countess de Ferrin.

‘ Forgive my getting up,’ said the young woman breathlessly, ‘ but I am still so weak ;’ and sinking back on her pillow, she held out a thin wasted hand to her visitor.

‘ Don’t, please,’ said Margaret, coming

forward hastily, touched by the change in Helen's appearance. 'I hope I am not disturbing you, but I thought I would like to see you.'

'Yes, I am so glad you came; I am too ill to get about yet, otherwise I would have found my way to Stourton Court. This wretched fever which is hanging about me keeps me quite a prisoner to the house, and Dr. Clark is such a tyrant.'

It would have been impossible to say whether the shallow nature beside her was deceived by the smile that accompanied these words; the inference is that she was too absorbed in her own affairs to think about those of anyone else.

'I thought I should like to come and talk over things,' she said awkwardly, as she sat down in a chair beside the sofa.

Helen was solemn in an instant.

'Yes. What do you want to talk over, Margaret?'

'I think I was unjust to you.'

'Let bygones be bygones. You thought you were justified, and there is an end of it.'

‘Ah, but that is not the end of it for me. My happiness is destroyed, my home is broken up through this foolish business.’

‘Hardly, I think, Margaret.’

‘It is. Look at the position I am in now : my husband away, with not a line or word from him since he left.’

‘You have heard from him ?’

‘Not once ; he has written to his mother, never to me. Sometimes I hear news through the Adairs ; you know, of course, he went out with Lord Adair. Lady Perceval suspects something of course, and tortures me with questions ; and then what must the world think ? I hardly like to go out for fear of meeting anyone.’

‘Never mind about that ; but this must be put right.’

‘How ?’ asked Margaret eagerly. ‘By bringing about communication between you and your husband ; but why did you act as you did ? Why did you write that desperate letter ?’

‘Because of what Laura Bellisle told me, and from what I saw. It was only by talking

with Florence and finding out some of the truth, that I began to doubt. It was too late then, however. You don't know how violent Maurice was. I dared not face him again, and left for Stourton ; there I was thrown into a state of doubt and despair by hearing of Maurice's constant visits to Russell Place. If I did wrong, surely you were not without blame.'

'No ; and it is to undo my mistake and yours that I have come to Stourton. We must set to work and find out the best way to mitigate Sir Maurice's anger.'

'The worst of it is, you see,' said Margaret piteously, 'I don't believe he ever loved me, I am certain Laura is right in that ; and then he told me so himself.'

'He told you that in a moment of passion. A man's real love is in the end for his wife ; she must always represent what men value more than anything else in the long-run—position, comfort, home.'

'I don't think so—not in his case. You have no idea how reckless he was in his passion ; and he refuses to touch any of my

fortune, saying that the money would burn his fingers. Fancy, Helen, what a hopeless breach there is ! I expect the birth of my child in the summer, and—and—and he does not know it. I have not ventured even to tell my mother-in-law.'

The last words ended in a sob. Margaret fairly broke down, and for a few minutes nothing was said. Then Helen's voice, changed and hollow, fell upon the silence of the room :

'I had no idea of this.'

'Of course,' Margaret went on, interrupted by sobs, 'I know I am not clever or beautiful; but I loved him truly and well—so well that his neglect is breaking my heart, and I can tell no one.'

'Margaret, you must go now,' interrupted Helen, laying her hand gently in hers; 'I want to think for a little quietly. Come and see me again to-morrow; I shall be here all day. And be sure, this business shall be put right.'

For some time after Margaret's departure Helen lay motionless on the sofa where she

had left her. She thought over his last letter : ' I swear to God that I will never go back to Margaret—that I will never go back even to England—unless you promise me your friendship and the chance of seeing and being with you ! You are the only woman I ever really cared for, and I know you reciprocate my feelings. What matters anything in the world, therefore, but your love and mine ? I am perfectly indifferent to Margaret ; she has not given me cause to be otherwise. No, Helen ; by love, by everything that is most sacred, you and I belong to one another ! We cannot escape from the fatality of our destiny. For a woman's self-sacrificing whim you refused happiness when you and I might have had it fully and freely ; now we must save what we can out of the wreck. I would ask nothing of you but friendship ; the chance of seeing you, hearing your voice every day. If you promise me that, I will return when my duty here is over. I will pledge my word, if you promise me that, to be kind and courteous to Margaret. She shall

never suspect us again. The world shall never know, and you will have restored peace and tranquillity both to my heart and yours.'

As she dwelt again on the passionate words of persuasion—for Sir Maurice continued for pages in the same strain—it never entered her head to blame him for selfishness. What woman ever blames a man for loving her too much? But in the last few months she had acquired the power of realizing what she herself really was. She knew she was strong in his absence; in his presence she was weak as a child. She recalled with trembling fear those glowing, enchanted days at Russell Place, knowing, with her present experience, more surely where they would have led her. She was a woman of quick and unpremeditated action. Although she had only just seen Margaret, she already felt armed with sufficient strength to make a resolution she had been contemplating since the receipt of his letter, and which seemed to her now the only solution for all difficulties. The convent is

the supreme refuge for women of her religion and temperament. She would devote the rest of her days to the service of the Church.. With a feeling of yearning and aspiration her thoughts flew to the tranquil, secluded convent-garden at Villarette ; she would take her unrestrained, passionate heart there, and, like Saint Thérèse, 'offer to God her judgment and her will.' Who or what had she to live in the world for ? Her mother was gone ; Laurence Ferrers would very soon find consolation in his books ; and she must never again see the man she loved.

There was something high-strung, romantic in the idea, too, that had its charm for a poetic nature like hers. She lay thinking it over until the intention took form and consistence, and, in her impulsive way, she determined to act immediately. Why should the state of tension and uncertainty be unnecessarily prolonged ? As soon as her strength would permit, she would write to Maurice in such terms that he must listen to her and then, by inexorably closing the

convent door between them, she would oblige him to accept her conditions. Then she would ask her uncle to take her to Villarette without telling him the object of her journey, as she knew his dislike to the idea of the monastic life for either men or women.

Dr. Clark, when he came to see her that evening, declared her pulse to be feverish and irregular, and his patient less well than she had been since her arrival at Stourton.





CHAPTER XVII.

'Look long, O longing eyes, and look in vain.
Strain idly, aching heart, and yet be wise,
And hope no more for things to come again,
That thou beholdest once with careless eyes.'

NEXT morning Helen pleaded a bad headache, and remained in her room all the morning. She had made up her mind to write to Maurice, and wanted perfect quiet to concentrate her mind on what she was going to say. Some of my readers might have smiled on seeing her kneel down beside her bed, as if she were still a little child by her mother's knee, and ask for strength to accomplish her task. Had they remarked, however, the look of rapture on her face as she rose, they might have been more inclined to bow the head in

deference to the power that could thus support a weak and flagging spirit.

‘I did not intend,’ she began, ‘to write to you again, and my only reason for doing so is the hope that before I leave those I love for ever I may be of some use to them. You will see I am back here again, in the place where I first met you. The memories that may be recalled to you will, perhaps, soften your heart to listen to what I have to say. I saw your wife yesterday, and she asked me to intercede with you—to ask you to forgive her the foolishness of which she has been guilty, and which she now deeply regrets. She loves you deeply and truly, and love is a priceless gift that ought not heedlessly to be cast away. There are other reasons that ought to call forth all your tenderness—she is expecting a child in the summer, and I only pray that this may be a bond between you in the future. As to any friendship or any chance of your seeing me again, I am afraid that is impossible; for I purpose taking refuge from

the sorrows and heart-breaks of the world in one of those havens which our Church holds open to those who are weary in body and soul.

‘ Before this letter reaches you, I shall have entered the Sisterhood of the Sacré Cœur, at Villarette : I can remember so well the quiet and peace of the old convent, and I sigh for the rest as a thirsty traveller on a sultry day longs for a drink of cool water.

‘ We are parting, therefore, for life ; and before I do so, I must tell you, once for all, that I love you better than anything on earth, and that is why I leave you. Let us be able to look back on our love as a strength and consolation, by retrieving the past as far as we can. If we do that, even death will not be able to separate us ; for death only separates in this world. You never believed in my creed—I cannot ask you, therefore, to approve of what I am doing. I never was clever, or able to argue about things ; but I feel what is right in my own weak, blundering way. And I know if

we try to remain loyal and true, come what may, we never can be totally unhappy. You will say that it is through no fault of our that we loved before our interests were bound up in those of others : don't let us deceive ourselves. It is we who have sinned—we who have done wrong ; and it is no use blaming anything or anyone but our own erring hearts.

'I should like to have heard from you once more, to receive the assurance that you will come back to Margaret and your duties here ; but it cannot be—for, as I have already told you, we shall have left Stourton before you get this letter. I feel, however, that he whom I love will not fall below the estimate I have formed of him.

'Good-bye.

'HÉLÈNE DE FERRIN.'

After she had written, directed, and closed her letter, Helen felt brighter and better than she had done for days. She was borne along by the impetus of her heroic resolution. When she appeared

downstairs, Mary Byers, with that prescience in making true statements by chance often displayed by stupid people, said in her gentle way :

‘I remember, my dear, when I was young, if an illness went from my heart to my head, I generally got well, for then I could sleep it off.’

In the afternoon Margaret arrived, full of eager solicitude about her own affairs.

‘I have written to your husband,’ Helen told her, ‘and I think my letter will have the desired effect. There it is. Will you post it?’

‘How can I thank you?’ said Margaret, almost ashamed to take it, and putting her arms round Helen instead. ‘What a traitor I have been! Will you ever forgive me?’

‘I forgave you long ago. And now, Margaret, there is something you can do for me. We are going away from here in a few days.’

‘In a few days? Why?’

‘Because I want to go back for a time to

my home in France, at Villarette. I have an idea that the air of the hills there will set me up, and I don't think England agrees with me. I want you, therefore, before I go, to take me for a drive. I should like to see dear old Stourton once more, and I want also to return Lady Perceval's kind visit.'

'Of course. Can you come this afternoon?'

'No; I am too tired this afternoon, and I have to make arrangements with my uncle about our leaving.'

'To-morrow then, if it is fine. Do you mind coming with me in the pony-cart? I am a good whip, and the springs are so easy. I think it would be the most comfortable for you.'

A vision flashed across Helen's mind of the day when he and she had driven to Davenport, and he had sung to her coming home in the twilight. Her voice faltered slightly as she answered:

'Yes; I should like it of all things. Do you drive the same pony as—Sir Maurice used to?'

‘The chestnut? Yes. I will come then to-morrow about three, I suppose?’

‘Yes; a little before three. I don’t like to be out late.’

Taking Helen’s letter, Margaret gave her one of her made-to-order embraces, and went.

The Court was much changed since the day Helen had first seen it. Powdered foot men, for whom Lady Perceval had expressed so supreme a contempt when she could not afford them, now ushered the visitors through the stately, thickly-carpeted hall; and in every nook and corner stood delicate pink-and-white-blossomed azaleas and stands of hyacinths. They found Lady Perceval in the south drawing-room, in company with Mrs. Brotherton, who had, unfortunately for Helen, come to pay an afternoon visit.

The old lady was courteous and affectionate. Thus whatever Mrs. Brotherton’s attitude of mind may have been towards Helen, she was kept in check—for to follow

Lady Perceval's lead in social matters had become traditional in Stourton.

'I hope you are stronger, Countess de Ferrin. Those Italian fevers are so troublesome to get rid of. I remember my son brought one home with him when he was stopping in Rome with the Guardias. But, you remember, you were not well when you came down here before, and Stourton air did you so much good. I hope you intend to make a stay this time.'

It was the same voice, the same manner, the same assumption of interest in other people's concerns that Helen remembered so well; and she looked up at the boy's portrait with the sad eyes that gazed upon her, and listened to it all as in a dream.

The old lady seemed determined especially to refer to her son on every occasion, turning to Margaret and Helen whenever she did so. She talked of the war, and of the climate, and at last said with a smile:

'It does not seem to me, indeed, that he ever will care to come home again.'

'The life, of course, must have all the

charm of novelty,' answered Helen; and then she turned to Mrs. Brotherton, who was complimenting her upon her appearance, and informing her she looked more like a fashion-plate than ever.

They then talked of Stourton people, and Helen heard with interest that Mr. Ffrench was engaged to be married.

'Exactly the match we should have liked him to make. One of the Dalzells—such a quiet, modest girl! It is so great a relief to us that he has escaped the numerous traps that were laid for him. He was one of our few eligible young men, if you remember, Countess de Ferrin.'

Helen assented mechanically, and presently asked Lady Perceval if she might go and see the chapel. She wanted to get away, to be alone with her memories.

As she passed along the passages and down the corridors, she thought how one day there would be a son to inherit the position and name; and how Maurice would live honourably and nobly as became his traditions, and the old house would be full of

the noise of baby-feet, and re-echo the sound of baby-laughter. After a time children's hands would bring him and Margaret together, and lead him back into the paths of duty and peace. 'And I,' she thought—'I will be cut off from all earthly ties and interests; but I can pray for him.' And still Margaret's voice beside her chattered on unceasingly.

Helen turned at last and looked at her, thinking almost with a sob, 'This—this is the woman I gave him up to. This is the woman with whom he is to realize a perfect life. Ah, Maurice, Maurice! none of them will ever love you as I have.'

As they prepared to go home, a pale, clear winter sky stretched above; no nightingales were singing, no flowers were blooming. She asked Margaret to drive along the canal. How different it looked from that May-day! the water was sluggish and black, the banks were covered with a coating of frost, the wind moaned sadly through the telegraph-wires, while the village of Stourton loomed leaden through

the mist. Helen shivered, and drew her cloak round her. Any of us that have ever firmly and determinedly refused happiness, put it away from us, and then settled down to face the vacancy of a life alone, know what she felt and realized to herself, in the anguish of this eternal separation; and yet a feeling of peace descended with the evening twilight on her senses. That chapter, full of sunlight and shadow, was closed. She was about to enter a land of twilight from which love and the ardour of life were shut out, but where, at least, she would not have the perplexities and sufferings she had had here. It was like a dream—she would be swept away, others would succeed her, but nature would ever remain the same. He would come home and find these fields, and roads, and trees, and begin another life amongst them, while she was far away, forgotten, alone! And meantime Margaret talked on.

Before Helen left Stourton, she told Mrs. Clark her intention of going into a sisterhood, and never revisiting Stourton again;

but begged her not to mention it to anyone.

Amelia was one of those people who could be trusted with a secret ; unlike Mary, who spent her life letting innumerable cats out of innumerable bags, and shutting innumerable stable-doors upon innumerable horses she had already let out. That evening, however, at dinner, the old lady so unusually forgot herself as to appear with two caps on—one over the other, which added to her imposing appearance. She did not, either, join in the discussion that took place between her husband and brother on the subject of Wellington, even when Mr. Byers turned on his antagonist, and declared the Duke to be the greatest ‘Philistine’ that ever lived, and only worthy of being the hero of an uncultured people like the English.



CHAPTER XVIII.

‘Es ist bestimmt, in Gottes Rath,
Dass man vom Liebsten was man hat
Muss scheiden.’

HE evening sun was casting its last rays on the old city of Quebec, painting the cathedral tower and quaint high-roofed houses crimson, and gradually creeping up the face of the rock-encircled citadel, until it illumined the figures of two men. One of them was lounging on the parapet wall, while the other was standing. Both were utilizing their hour of leisure by smoking and talking in a low-voiced desultory manner.

‘How dwoll it seems to think they are in the swing of it now on the other side the herring-pond. You would be stewing

in the House, Perceval, and I should be twaversing miles of parquet every night —eh?’

The individual who was leaning against the wall, with his back to the beautiful scene that stretched out beneath him, turned interrogatively to his companion as he spoke.

‘I prefer this, I must say,’ he replied softly, blowing away the smoke of his cigar.

‘I should like a little more variety.’

‘Why don’t you look at the magnificent view, then? It is changing every moment under the sunset. What a wonderful foliage they have in this country!’

‘Not to be compared to the twees at Hurlingham.’

Perceval smiled.

‘You are an incorrigible cockney, Adair.’

‘Don’t know. Don’t think I should mind this country if they would let us move on,’ with a yawn.

‘They can’t until the rivers are free of ice.’

‘If there was only a decent-looking woman in the place.’

‘I heard you in ecstasies about one in the cathedral yesterday.’

‘Yes, a nun; but what’s the good of that?’

‘Better than nothing.’

‘Perhaps; but I long for a talk with one of one’s kind.’

‘I never could tell what brought you out here.’

‘Fear, my dear fellow—basest cowardice.’

‘What do you mean?’

‘She was so audaciously pwetty, wasn’t she?’

‘Who?’

‘Miss Chawner. Why, I was carried away like chaff before the wind.’

‘A good deal of chaff, but very little atmospheric disturbance, I think. I don’t believe the girl ever looked at you.’

‘No, that was the worst of it; but she looked *some* at my viscountship.’

Maurice laughed.

‘I think I am well out of it. Fancy, my

dear fellah, if I had gone to my gwand-papa, and told him that I aspired to the hand of a member of the great firm of Chawner, Bacon, and Co., pig-despatchers and pork-contractors! Why, bless my soul, every atom of that personalty would have gone to my scoundrel of a cousin! He'd have cut me off with a threepenny-bit.'

Stirred into a semblance of excitement at the thought, Lord Adair began walking up and down. Nothing was said for a time, and Maurice heard him murmuring softly:

‘There was a young man named Adair,
Who made all the good folks to stare,
For he played hankey pankey,
And married a Yankey—
That foolish young man named Adair.’

He was beginning again, ‘There was a young man——’ when, suddenly turning, he saw an orderly appear at the entrance to the parapet.

‘Letters! By Jove, what a godsend!’ and turning, he took a packet from the man’s hand. ‘There are some for you too, Perceval.’

A silence, broken only by the rustling of paper, settled on the two while they opened the envelopes and read the contents.

'Talk of the devil ! Why, she's going to be married ! She's done better than me. My sister tells me she'll be a future duchess !'

Looking up for a moment from his letter, the young man turned to his companion, and was startled by the expression of his face. With an Englishman's reticence, however, on the subject of his fellow-man's emotions he said nothing. Presently Maurice threw away his cigar, and with an oath flung himself off the wall where he was sitting, and walked away.

Lord Adair did not see him again that evening ; and was obliged to try and keep up his spirits alone, by partaking of a pint of champagne and one or two brandy-and-sodas.

Meantime, Maurice paced his narrow barrack-room with agitated passionate footsteps. Helen's appeal had hardly the effect she hoped. Amid the storm of indignation and grief that swept over him,

there was not one ennobling sentiment, unless it be that ‘faith in unfaith’ inherent in every man’s nature, which renders him always more constant to an unlawful than a lawful passion. His first feeling was wounded *amour propre*; the next, that he had been treated badly by everyone, but principally by the woman whom he loved. He still hugged to himself the idea, ‘She shall be mine one day.’ The going back to Margaret was only a collateral, and disagreeable necessity connected with the rapture of returning to the woman that he loved. Like all men of his temperament, the last interview with Helen had increased his passion fourfold, and not in the least convinced him that she never—never could be his.

Maurice’s experience of women did not lead him to think that they were in earnest when they made this sort of statements. She had told him that she loved him; the rest was but a question of time and patience. This proud, passionate woman was difficult to win, but better worth the winning than

others. And when he had thought of life in the future under these circumstances, it stretched out before him full of golden possibilities. Now his ‘Château en Espagne’ had been turned into a ‘mortuary chapel.’ ‘Does she mean what she says?—is it written in a sudden moment of exaltation?—or will she really do it?’ A sudden vision of the pale-faced nuns he and Adair had seen in the cathedral, looking like corpses in their white swathing-bands and black veils, appeared to him. ‘Will she, with her lovely smile, her sweet true eyes, and rippling waves of hair, be transformed into a phantom like that?’ It was too horrible! A leaden feeling of incapacity to do anything came over him, and he vented his animosity on Margaret. ‘Fool, why couldn’t she leave things alone?’ The news Helen told him recurred to his mind, but only to make him feel the materialism and baseness of life, for which circumstances were to blame, not he.

After some time spent in these meditations, he opened his other letters. One was

from his mother, ignoring, with all the finesse of a woman of the world, any necessity for not mentioning Helen's name, and describing her as looking delicate, but more charming than ever.

'No woman sees any further than her own interests,' was his angry remark as he walked to the window, from which the view swept the valley, with its broad shining river, and the horizon towards which, in a few days, he would be journeying, and from whence he almost hoped he never might return. Suddenly his glance fell on the small high-walled garden of the Ursuline convent, that lay under the wall of the citadel. 'Ah, to think that she was to be immured in a place like that!' and yet, at the same moment, his intolerant, vehement heart gave a bound while he murmured, 'At least no other man will ever touch her lips, or call her his.' When some hours later, having wearied himself with surmises and conjectures, he put an end to his perplexities by lighting a cigar and wandering out beneath the stars to calm his excitement, he met

Adair, who informed him that an order had come from Colonel Wolseley, ordering them to the front as soon as possible. From utter stagnation they immediately passed into the extreme of hurry and bustle; and Maurice realized still more distinctly how useless it was for him to attempt to avert the course of events at home. He did not even write an answer to Helen's letter. Only one resolution he made in his heart; and that was, that he would sooner wander away into the wilds of the great Lone-land—sooner exist from hand to mouth, like one of the Sioux Indians whom he saw now and then in the streets of Quebec, and let his bones whiten on the prairie, than go back to Margaret, to lead a contracted miserable life, unbrightened by happiness and un beautified by love. Animated by such sentiments, he hailed as a release the idea of journeying away up the reaches of the sweeping river, over storm-swept wastes, towards the setting sun, leaving behind him the memories of his past, memories only of torture and misery.

Through the travelling and forced marches up the Red River, no one proved so efficient as Sir Maurice Perceval. He would himself lend a shoulder to drag the canoes along the ‘portages’; or would often send a poor fellow to rest while he took his gun and did sentry by the watch-fire for the rest of the night. But there was a reckless, hard expression on his face that made even those he was kindest to shrink from him, and effectually silenced the loquacity of the volatile Adair. It needed a more urgent summons even than that he had already received, to induce his imperious temper to give way.

After the fighting was over, and Colonel Wolseley had returned to Quebec, Sir Maurice and Lord Adair accepted the joint command of a small body of troops destined to penetrate farther north into some of the Hudson Bay Company’s property, to assist the local authorities in putting down the disaffection that existed amongst the French half-breeds. The mission lasted into the middle of winter, and then did not seem

likely to be accomplished for some time. Neither, however, minded much how long they stayed away ; Adair being tired, as he said, of civilization, and Maurice dreading the idea of leaving the freedom and independence of the boundless plains for the constraint and unhappiness that awaited him when he should turn his face southwards. But the summons came one night towards the end of the year.

The expedition had camped amidst the woods fringing the banks of the Great Saskatchewan river. Who could describe the strange beauty of the scene surrounding the adventurous little band ? Beyond the belt of leafless trees, the broad expanse of prairie stretched like a boundless sea ; while near at hand, the river looked ghostly under its coating of steel-coloured ice, on which the moon and stars shone through the purity of the atmosphere with a weird and mysterious light. In the silence of the night the subdued sighing of the wind among the pine-woods, and the barking of the sledge-dogs,

came borne to their ears, making an accompaniment to the voices round the camp-fire.

The two young men were sitting slightly apart. Maurice had fallen into a long silence—one of those silences to which men are prone when they have lived amid vast solitudes, face to face with nature, for many days. Adair was murmuring a nonsense-rhyme he had composed on the occasion of his last dinner at Quebec, and never yet polished to his satisfaction :

‘There was a young man of Quebec,
Who liked his champagne pretty sec,
So he sat in a chair,
With his feet in the air,
That dolorous youth of Quebec.’

Then turning to his companion, he said with satisfaction, as he stretched out his legs and leant against the pine-tree behind him :

‘We have had a howid day of it. How splendidly these poor fellahs have done their work !’

‘Yes; we can work when they want us

to—can't we?' answered his companion absently.

' I am shaw, if I were to tell any weasonably-minded girl, when I go home, that I have dwiven a hundred miles in one day, and had nothing but pemmican and tea for my afternoon meal, she would mawy me on the spot. By Jove! what a splendid falling star! Did you see it?'

' Yes! and the streak of light it has left across the sky.'

While he spoke, Maurice saw, as in a dream, the dining-room at Stourton, and he heard a soft voice saying,

' C'est une étoile qui file, file et disparaît !'

' Never remember anything finer at the Cwystal Palace.'

And Adair began to prepare his bed of furs, repeating as he did so,

' There was a young man of Quebec ;'

while Maurice took a packet of letters out of his pocket that had been given to him at the last station. Amongst them was one with a foreign post-mark. He recognised the handwriting and opened it.

' Convent of the Récouvrance, Orleans.
' Chatelineau, Ambulance of the Sacred Heart,
' Dec. 3rd.

' DEAR SIR MAURICE,

' You will be astonished to see the address at the top of this letter. I am in the rush and stress of war as well as you. I wrote to you some months ago from Stourton, telling you my intention of joining the sisterhood at Villarette. Hardly had I begun my novitiate, ere war broke out. News has of course reached you, even out in the distant West, of the disasters that have befallen my unfortunate country. As soon as I and the rest of the sisters got the call to go, we did not hesitate. For me, it was like a ray of light breaking through the dark clouds of uncertainty that surrounded me. I was entering the convent because there was no other solution of my life possible. Now all is clear and plain before me.

' France has need of my services. Don't smile. In my feeble way, I am serving France at this moment; and what is still

more, I am serving humanity. We have no real existence, unless it be one that we can attune to unison with the whole of mankind.

‘I have ceased to think of happiness as a possibility for myself, but I can always diminish the sorrow of others. A clue has been put into my hand by which to thread the mazes of life: to live because we can lighten suffering and pain. Nothing but that seems now tangible and real. Everything else has retired into the background.

‘It was terrible to bear when I first came, but death itself loses its horror when you are familiar with it.

‘I am at present in the Convent of the Récouvrance at Orleans. It is a large, four-story house; every room, every passage is full of wounded—French on one side, German on the other; for we take in both. Our arms have been victorious, and hope begins to dawn even in the hearts of us poor French people. On the 9th of November, our troops, under the command of Aurelle de Paladines, took the position of

Coulmiers from the enemy, after a long and desperate struggle. They say it was a wonderful sight to see how our poor fellows fought. They had so long been without a head whom they could respect and follow without fear, that they risked their lives uselessly to obey the commands of our brave General. Ah! you should have seen him as he and his staff entered the cathedral to attend mass before the engagement! It was a sight to do your heart good. It revived the best traditions of France. When the Bishop turned towards the crowd as they knelt on the pavement, and raised the Host, the sunlight striking on his noble face, whilst a breathless silence reigned, we all of us felt there was still a future in store for our country. People may say what they like; a nation must fight for loyalty and religion, or it cannot fight at all. The Germans did not believe in the army of the Loire, because they did not believe in the capacity of one honest, brave man to animate the soldiers with courage ; a leader who, regardless of the insults of Messieurs

de Freycinet and Gambetta, simply answers : “ Love of our country gives the courage to bear the insults to our dignity they heap on us. We only ask to spill our blood, and avenge the humiliations of France.”

‘ But here I am, you see, in my old passionate way, rushing into party questions, forgetting that I only wanted to write and tell you how I fared, and hear from you in return ; for I know—I feel that from the heights on which we now stand, we can clasp hands at last, sure that nothing base or unworthy will come between us.

‘ We all wear a crimson heart, embroidered on black cloth, attached to the tunic of our sisterhood, with the words written below it, “ Arrête ! le cœur de Jésus est ici.” The presence of the Saviour in our hearts turns aside the enemy’s fire, and all earthly, dis-honourable thoughts. I send you one. Will you throw away the amber heart I once gave you, and promise to wear this instead ?

‘ It is no use my telling you of the suffering and misery here. Ah, I should like to

show it to those who make wars ! It would not be so bad could we get what we wanted ; but often we are in need of every-thing—lint, bandages, sometimes even food and clothes. The poor fellows come in in cartloads after eleven and twelve hours in the cold and snow, frostbitten and unconscious. Sometimes they have only time to breathe some loved name, or send a message to a father, a mother, or some one still nearer and dearer. We sisters hear strange tragedies.

‘ My cousin Henri, whom I dare say you have heard me mention, was brought in wounded after the charge at Coulmiers. He was in the 22nd Mobiles of Dordogne, and was cited, poor fellow, for heroic behaviour. I did not think he would recognise me in my disguise ; but he guessed who I was by my voice and an old De Carrel ring I had on my finger. He died almost in my arms, begging me to tell his widow and child.

‘ All bonds that tied me to earth seem gradually slipping away. I almost long for

the peace of death, and indeed death becomes a little thing when it is so broadcast ; but I do not allow this idea to take possession of me. We have all still work to do, and mine now, thank God, lies clear before me. One of my saddest thoughts, when I have time to think, is that you still will have to face the future, with its perplexities and difficulties, while I can turn neither to the right nor the left. I have a great strong yearning to help you, but, *hélas*, I am only a woman, and have not the strength. You must live your life. Often in thought I picture the scenes you are amongst, and have watched your progress in the newspaper reports ; for we sometimes get an English paper out here.

‘I pray that you may be preserved from danger, and may fulfil your duty well and bravely, as I know you will. Now that the war is over, I suppose you will soon return to Stourton.

‘Yours ever,

‘HÉLÈNE DE FERRIN.’

So that was the end of his love-dream !

There, beneath the march of the silent stars, amid the solitude of the winter night, a tardy acknowledgment of repentance and regret swept over the soul of the man who read. By virtue of her noble impulse, generously, unselfishly carried out, she had already raised herself far above him who was so much stronger, so much cleverer than herself.

He took the little heart she had sent him, and bending down his head, pressed it to his lips ; then covering his face with his hands, he sat motionless, until the moon sank towards the horizon, and the barking of the dogs and the moaning of the wind died away upon the silence of the night, leaving him alone with his sorrow and his regret.



CHAPTER XIX.

'Renunciation remains sorrow, though a sorrow willingly borne.'

NE evening towards the end of May, 1876, three people, of whose history we have known something, passed along the steep, badly-paved street of an old-fashioned French town. One of the ladies of the party was dressed in the black robes and white bands of a member of a conventional order. In the worn, hollow face, with its prominent chin and sunken eyes, it would have been difficult to recognise the once brilliant Hélène de Ferrin. The other, with her Parisian dress and portly figure, formed a decided

contrast to the sister, and looked incongruous amidst the carved wooden doorways, clambering vines and overhanging eaves of the quaint old street. Maurice Perceval, who walked behind, seemed the least changed by the passage of the years. There were, perhaps a few grey hairs in the drooping moustache, the face was a little more sunburnt and weather-beaten, but otherwise he was the same as when we first saw him. A little girl, who filled the sunny silence of the street with her dancing footsteps and childish prattle, completed the party.

‘I am so glad you answered my summons,’ Helen was saying to her companion; ‘the last bond that held me to the outside world seems severed now. You can picture me here, as I can picture you at Stourton ; it is almost as beautiful as England, is it not?’ she asked, turning to Maurice with a smile.

‘Yes ; but you are deliberately shutting yourself away from it.’

‘The convent garden is beautiful, too, with its sunshine and its flowers. I will

pray, and think of those I love, so peacefully there. You can see it from here.'

As she spoke, she turned and pointed towards the valley. It was a fair scene that stretched beneath them, with its billowy waves of foliage intercepted by the silver band of river. The evening breeze as it rustled through the trees was laden with the scent of the new-mown hay that lay in the fields and hung on the hedges between which the heavily-laden cart-loads had passed.

' My poor, ill-used, beautiful France,' Helen murmured softly, as she turned away.

' You never told me Villarette was as picturesque as this,' said Maurice beside her, pushing back his hat and letting the breeze blow on his face.

' Didn't I? Unfortunately you are obliged to leave this evening, or I would take you up by the old château and round by the valley through the chestnut woods. This is the part, however, that always reminds me of Stourton,' she added, as they wandered on towards a ravine that opened between the hills. ' There is the canal I

used to tell you of. Doesn't it look calm and tranquil compared to the rushing river outside? It is the life of the cloister compared to the life of the world.'

Helen, as she spoke, stood leaning on the small wooden bridge that spanned the gorge, looking down at the still waters beneath, as though her thoughts had flown back to former years—sanctuaries of memory where not even *he* could follow her.

' Listen to the birds; and look at the trees —like great *Cristbäumen*. Don't they remind you of home?' the little girl said, breaking in on her reverie, and pointing to the chestnut trees with their upstanding pink and white blossoms.

' Yes, darling; but take care not to walk on the fallen ones. I never can bear to see flowers trodden under foot ;' and Helen, checking the little girl's impetuosity, bent down and lifted the chestnut-petals tenderly in her hand.

' I remember your love for flowers of old, Countess de Ferrin,' said Maurice's voice behind.

‘I suppose we can put on what disguise we like—we ever remain the same.’

Maurice turned away with feelings of pain. He could not reconcile himself to the dress in which everything had purposely been contrived to hide all feminine grace, with its long sleeves, full skirt, and the clinging bands surrounding the whiteness of her face, that made her look already like a corpse.

‘Which way shall we go now?’ asked the little girl, when, crossing the bridge, they reached a place where the road separated into two—one portion descending to the valley, the other leading up the hill.

‘We have come to cross-roads, like everyone in life, you see,’ said Helen, with a smile. ‘Which shall we take—the one that goes down, or ‘the one that goes up?’

‘There will be a better view above,’ suggested Margaret practically.

‘Very well, let us go up the hill. What a happy world it would be if everyone did the same!’

‘I suppose it would ;’ and Margaret walked on ahead.

‘Countries, as well as individuals,’ went on Helen, following the thread of her thought, ‘come to cross-roads in their history—one leading down, and the other up ; unfortunately my poor country chose the downward course, but they are retracing their steps. I think they are retracing their steps—don’t you?’ and she turned a face towards Maurice illuminated with a faint reflection of the enthusiasm of the old days.

‘I think they are,’ he answered, meeting her direct gaze unflinchingly. ‘Then failure and victory are so often one.’

‘Tell us about your experiences in the war, will you, Helen?’ And Margaret turned and stopped. ‘See, there is a bench ; let us sit down and gossip comfortably.’

They followed her suggestion, and talked until the sunlight began to turn golden over the valley at their feet. The Percevals and their little girl had only arrived at Villarette that morning, and were

to leave the same night by the mail train for Italy, where they intended passing the summer and winter. Helen had pressingly asked them to come just then, for, her novitiate being over, the moment had arrived when she was obliged, by the rules of the Order, to enter into the stricter vows of seclusion and silence.

‘This is the last time,’ she told them, ‘that I shall be able to see you. And I felt I should like to have one more talk before I left the world for ever.’ She laid her hands on both of theirs as she spoke. ‘I am dead henceforth as *Hélène de Ferrin*; and imagine how I am changed,’ she added, with a quiver in her voice. ‘Don’t laugh! my convent name is *Maria Placida*. You would hardly believe, in the old days, that I ever could have been entitled to the *Placida*—could you? The idea of a convent is, I suppose, displeasing to you. You look upon it as little better than an imbecile asylum—for me it has become the type of peace. There are sometimes sad nights and days—sometimes sad months and years,

when strange, wild yearnings will arise in one's heart; but on the whole, I am happy. And then, after all,

“ Be the day weary or be the day long,
At last it ringeth to evensong.”

A journey always seems so much shorter when you look back upon it; you forget all but one or two salient points.’

‘ Do you ever sing now?’ asked Maurice presently.

‘ Only in the church choir on Sundays. I find my recitation very useful, however, as an amusement for the children. You have no idea how successful “Cinderella” and “Blue Beard” are with *musical illustrations*. Ah, yes,’ she added, with a sigh, ‘ that is one of my great sorrows, now that I am taking the stricter vows. I shall not be allowed to teach the little children.’

‘ Monstrous!’ muttered Maurice under his breath, not intending her to hear; but she answered him gently :

‘ No; it suits me. I was never strong or clever—I require a life of prayer and con-

temptation. The psalter and breviary satisfy my literary capacity. I have done my work—I can rest now.'

'But those whom you leave outside?'

'I must remember no one except in prayer. No one enters the inner door of the convent but the doctor to see the sick, and the priest to attend the dying. I never pass it to come out again ; even my corpse will be buried within the walls. We sisters say, we are like the pane in the church window, which when broken is replaced by another. To comfort them, I tell them that so long as we let a little light shine through for others, our vocation is fulfilled. I shall be able, Margaret, to see you at the "grille;" but that is not much satisfaction, as it is only a small loophole, and we should not be allowed more than a few minutes together. I will make you promise, however, years hence, if I am not dead, to bring your girl when she is grown up. I should like to see what she is like. I wish I could be of use to her ; but I can always pray. Do you know what my

prayer will be? That she may be given a gentle heart. All the tragedies in women's lives are caused by unrestrained passionate hearts.' Her voice trembled as she spoke.

There was a pause; they sat looking at the valley lit up by the level beams of the evening sun. Then the conversation turned upon other things. She told them how Laurence Ferrers, in despair at her determination to enter a convent, had gone to Geneva, and founded an international paper of the most revolutionary description.

'He permits himself to say very bitter things of religion and priests, I believe; but of course I never see it, and can never hold any communication with him, which is a great grief to me.'

Margaret and Maurice retailed all the Stourton news, in which Helen took a childish interest, asking after the Clarks and Byers', and smiling when she heard Amelia was still called 'straightener-in-general' by Mr. Byers, and that Dr. Clark talked as much as he used to of the Duke of Wellington.

The minutes passed away, the sun sank lower, leaving the valley in shadow, and a light mist began to ascend from the river. For some seconds more Margaret went on talking; her two companions sat silent, observing the smallest details of the scene before them as though they were noting a particular date in a diary or underlining a passage in a book that they wished to remember for ever.

Suddenly, from the distance, the chime of a bell was borne on the evening breeze.

Helen listened a moment.

'That is the chapel bell of the convent,' she said, 'calling me to vespers. I must go. It so often reminds me of the bell at Stourton. I close my eyes when I hear it, and think of you all.'

'Yes, the sound *is* like,' said Margaret, taking out her watch to look at the time. 'We must hurry back also, Maurice, and see those boxes closed and corded. You know what a goose Bertha is; she will never have it properly done.'

Rising as she spoke, she took her little

girl by the hand and turned to descend the hill.

‘The parting must come at last,’ Maurice murmured in a low voice.

‘Yes; but I am glad we had the courage to clasp hands once more,’ Helen answered softly. ‘You go forth into the stress of the battle; I go back to silence and quiet. We shall meet in another world, where we shall be judged, not by the wrong we have done, but by what we have done to retrieve that wrong.’ Maurice was incapable of answering, and she went on. ‘After all, which of us can say we have wrought out our ideals into a perfect life? We only know that he who lays down his arms fresh and bright when the fight is over, is more to be commended than he who brings them unused and rusty. I often ask myself if all our suffering was in vain? I think not. You will work—you will be of use in the world—you will perhaps some day be great.’

‘What good will it be to me?’ he answered passionately. ‘I never can see

your smile! I never can hear your voice either in joy or sorrow!"

"Hush!" she answered solemnly, raising her hand. "I belong to Heaven now, but I can be with you in thought and prayer. And beyond—beyond this life, which so soon passes away, I will await—you—in—that—which is eternal! Be brave, be what you know I wish you to be, Maurice! We have no right to say we are tired of life—for we must live. I cannot argue about it. But I know there are only a few things certain that we can acknowledge, and say "this is right," and "that is wrong." When we have striven for what we think best we can look back on our career without regret. But here am I daring to speak to you,' and she laid her hand on his arm, 'who are so much better and stronger than I could ever be.'

Stifling back a sob, he took the little hand, while she added with a faint smile:

"We weak foolish people, however, have an eloquence of our own. And your little girl, she will be beautiful, and I hope——"

She stopped suddenly, for passing round the corner they came to a high stucco building, with boarded windows, that conveyed the impression of a place that was cut off from the world. When they reached the gateway, above which hung a lamp on an iron arch and the letters 'I. H. S.', the party stopped.

'You will say good-bye for me to everyone, will you not?' Helen asked, holding out her hand to Margaret. 'I hope you will enjoy your stay in Italy,' she added, addressing Maurice. 'I should like to travel from place to place, making the resting-place of yesterday the starting-point of the morrow.'

Margaret did not see the hidden meaning of the words, and anxiety about her boxes and Bertha hastened her farewell. For one instant Helen laid her hand on the child's head.

'Be sure you don't forget Sister Maria Placida,' she murmured softly, while she kissed the baby face.

Then turning, with another clasp of the

hand, she parted for ever from those with whom her life had been so closely inter-twined.

Maurice looked back as they went down the street, and saw the black-robed figure standing illumined by the rays of the setting sun. As he gazed the iron gate opened, and she vanished from his sight for ever.

THE END.



